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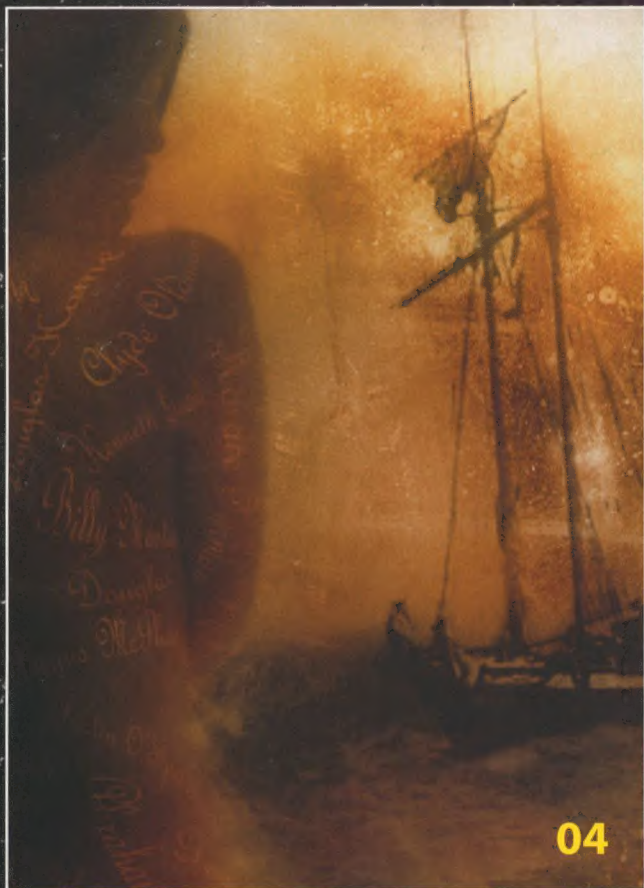
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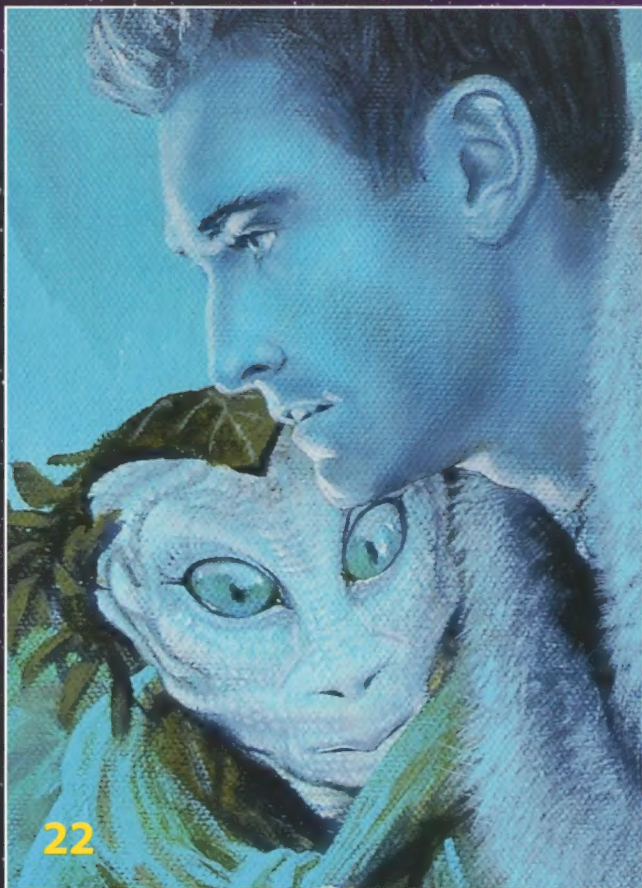
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MERCURIO D. RIVERA
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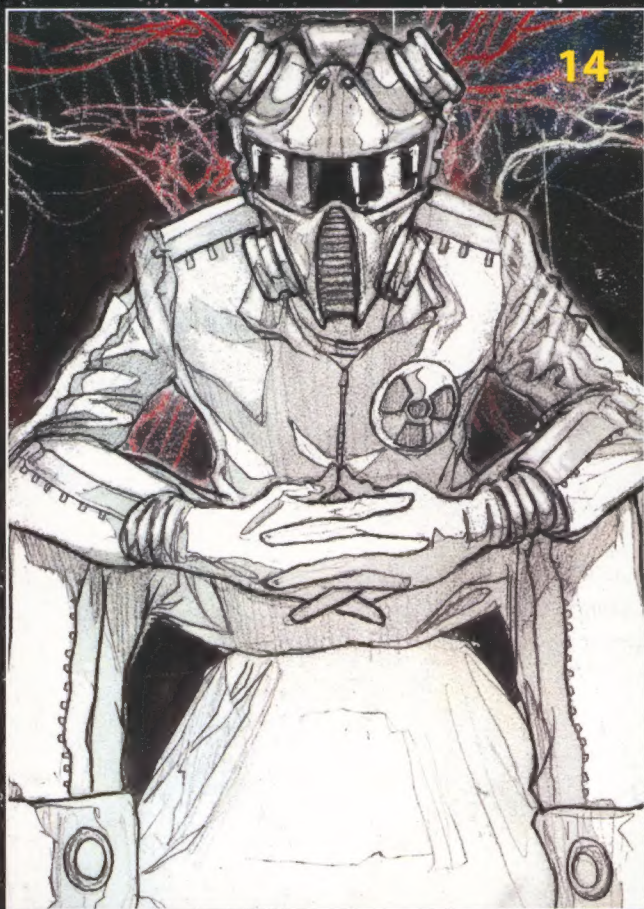




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EDITORIAL

A Testing Time for the Test of Time

Fantasy author Mark Charan Newton recently sparked a passionate blog discussion on the viability of sf and fantasy, concluding that sf is in terminal commercial decline while fantasy flourishes. Sf, he suggests, is falling victim to a positive feedback loop in which declining sales leave publishers unwilling to take risks.

Novelist Mark Chadbourn took issue with Newton's thesis, suggesting a definable 'community' makes sf more likely to stand the test of time. He lamented the fragmentation of audiences into 'tiny tribes': in order to flourish, he argued, both fields need writers willing to cross the boundaries of micro genres.

It is dangerous to write off entire genres. They tend to flourish, decline, and re-emerge – consider the fortunes of crime and horror over the years. Modern publishers react rapidly to instantly available and detailed sales information, but that doesn't mean their indicators are reliable in the longer term.

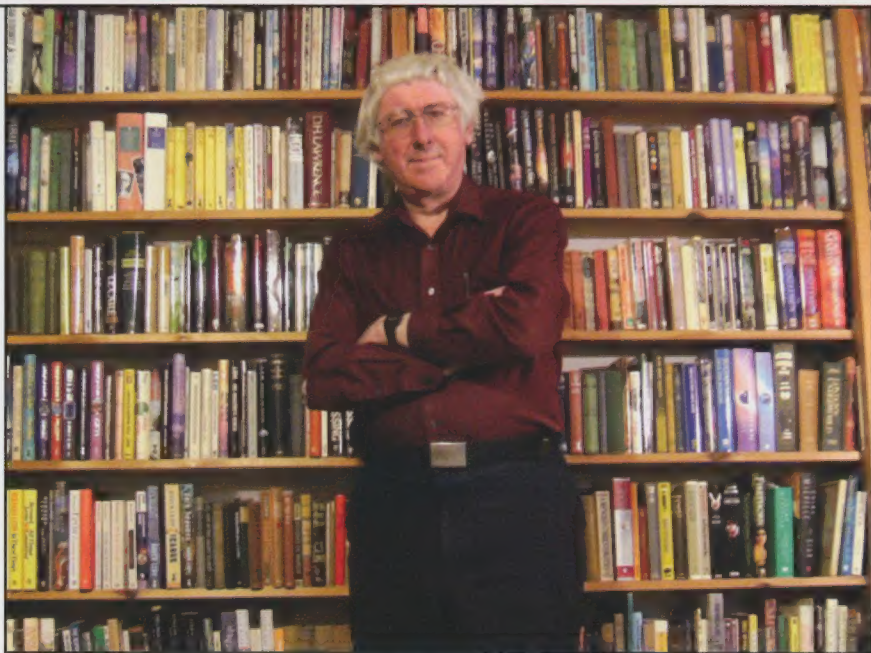
In an era defined by corrosive anxiety, profound unease and free floating anger you'd expect a significant readership for fiction offering spiritual truth and new ways of understanding the world.

Alan Garner's celebrated essay 'The Voice in the Shadow' relates the true story of an artist caught up in the siege of Stalingrad. As winter stung and people starved he was asked to draw the witches, trolls, ogres and goblins of folk memory. Fantasy offered spiritual truth.

And so too does sf. I don't know much about the science in science fiction but I know what I like: at its best, contemporary sf is profound and mysterious; one of the few forms that deals with the unknown and offers possibilities for coping with a mutable world.

I enjoyed Newton's provocative piece, but he may have jumped the gun with this theory. We saw plenty of sf at its best in 2009, from writers such as Suzanne Palmer, Jason Sanford, Will McIntosh and Nina Allen. Sf free of the tiny tribe mentality. Sf offering new myths; conjuring fresh and provocative images; and helping us cope with a world of disaffection, transience and loss. Sf, we hope, that resists premature burial.

Andrew Hedgecock

**LANGFORD IN HIS NATURAL HABITAT**

Tell Me The Old, Old Story. Morena Baccarin, playing the lead alien in the new *V*, has a unique insight: "V" is not necessarily a science-fiction show. It's more about relationships, drama and everyday stuff...' (*Boston Herald*) Likewise BBC1's *Paradox*, featuring Dick-style efforts to avert future disasters displayed by a precognitive computer: Tamzin Outhwaite, playing one would-be averter, says 'It's not sci-fi; it's more a police drama with a mad twist.' (*Total TV Guide*) [MPJ] She did not reach this conclusion lightly: 'Initially I thought it was a sci-fi project... Then I read the script and realised it wasn't. It's about police officers trying to work out whether there is a worm hole between two time zones.' (*Teletext TV Plus*)

Frank Frazetta's son Alfonso was caught red-handed removing \$20m worth of parental paintings from the Frazetta museum in Pennsylvania, after an accomplice ripped off its door with a mechanical excavator (or backhoe, as they say over there). Alfonso informed police that his father *told* him to do this; Frazetta Senior says he didn't. (BBC)

Court Circular. B.C. Bamber (who?) self-published a dystopian sf novel snappily titled *The Vast and Gruesome Clutch of Our Law*. When his father is bumped off by secret police, the hero 'escapes and sets out to halt the vile purges of Intrum and Justica ...' Could Bamber have a grudge against

the feared UK debt collection agency Intrum Justitia? 'The firm is consulting its legal advisers.' Vile purges may follow. (*Times*)

Awards. Booktrust Teenage Prize: Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*. World Fantasy Award for novel (tie): Jeffrey Ford, *The Shadow Year*; Margo Lanagan, *Tender Morsels*.

Terry Goodkind has been cruelly misjudged: 'First of all, I don't write fantasy. I write stories that have important human themes. They have elements of romance, history, adventure, mystery and philosophy. Most fantasy is one-dimensional. It's either about magic or a world-building. I don't do either.' (*USA Today*)

Roland Emmerich, purveyor of filmic holocaust, destroys many world landmarks in 2012 – with one tactical exception, the holy Kaaba at the heart of Mecca. 'Well, I wanted to do that, I have to admit [...] But my co-writer Harald [Kloser] said, "I will not have a fatwa on my head because of a movie." And he was right. [...] so I kind of left it out.' (Scifiwire.com)

The Weakest Link. Anne Robinson: 'In Winnie-the-Pooh, what type of animal is Tigger?' Contestant: 'A rabbit' (BBC1)

As Others See Some Of Us. Praise for a non-fantasy bestseller: *The Help* is '...a

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD

beacon in the darkness of contemporary book publishing – in a time when a vampire is the main character in a young adult novel responsible for four out of every twenty-five books sold...' (*Huffington Post*)

James Cameron's film *Avatar* seems strangely reminiscent of a Poul Anderson classic (*Astounding*, 1957): 'Like *Avatar*, *Call Me Joe* centers on a paraplegic – Ed Anglesey – who telepathically connects with an artificially created life form in order to explore a harsh planet (in this case, Jupiter). Anglesey, like *Avatar's* Jake Sully, revels in the freedom and strength of his artificial created body, battles predators on the surface of Jupiter, and gradually goes native as he spends more time connected to his artificial body.' (io9.com)

Contrast. When 'Ms Marmite Lover' staged a Marmite-themed dinner at her home restaurant, the Marmite people sent product freebies. When she planned a (non-profit) Harry Potter dinner whose guests would dress as wizards, Warner Bros sent a cease-and-desist letter: 'your proposed use of the Harry Potter properties [...] would amount to an infringement of Warner's rights.' (*Telegraph*)

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Geography: The War on Canada.* 'To relieve even more of the population stress, the United States had invaded the much smaller country.' (Junius Podrug, *Feathered Serpent* 2012, 2010) • *Simile Dept.* 'A swirling lava lamp of colors boiled on the screen like a hallucination that the cat had dragged in.' (Alexander Beshar, *Rim*, 1994) '...white sideburns that grew like a pair of moccasins at the sides of his head. His greying hair was slicked back carelessly to reveal a furrowed brow with a long bridged nose and brown eyes that dogged you like a pair of English spaniels.' (*Ibid*) 'Her eyes were like glass vacuum tubes, lit.' (*Ibid*) 'He looked up at Gobi with eyes like charcoal briquettes waiting to be lit.' (*Ibid*) 'They saw two matching crew cuts and eyes as dead as pool cues.' (*Ibid*) 'Looming just ahead of them on the maglev grid was an intersecting skyway ramp that looked like it would rip them off the truck as if they were medicated plasters of Salonpas.' (*Ibid*) 'It revealed Selinda as

painfully young. Her nipples were still pink like goldfish snouts...' (Robert Wells, *Right-Handed Wilderness*, 1973)

R-I-P

Christopher Anvil (Harry C. Crosby, Jr, 1925–2009), US author of many magazine stories – mostly in John W. Campbell's *Astounding* and *Analog* – died on 30 November aged 84. The first of his eight novels was *The Day the Machines Stopped* (1964).

I.F. Clarke (1918–2009), UK sf bibliographer, anthologist and scholar of future-war fiction whose books included *The Tale of the Future* (1961; revised 1972, 1978), *Voices Prophesying War* (1966; 1992) and *The Pattern of Expectation* (1979), died on 5 November. He received the SF Research Association's Pilgrim Award in 1974.

Don Congdon (1918–2009), US literary agent and anthologist who represented Ray Bradbury's for over 50 years from 1947, died on 30 November. He was 91. (*NY Times*)

Louise Cooper (1952–2009), UK fantasy author whose debut novel was *The Book of Paradox* (1973), died suddenly on 21 October. Her scores of fantasy and supernatural novels include the popular Time Master and Indigo series, plus much work for younger readers.

Lionel Davidson (1922–2009), UK writer of well-regarded thrillers whose sf/fantasy includes *The Sun Chemist* (1976) and the YA *Under Plum Lake* (1980, also as by David Line), died on 21 October aged 87.

Raymond Federman (1928–2009), French-born author long resident in the USA, whose *The Twofold Vibration* (1982) is dystopian sf, died on 6 October; he was 81.

Janet Fox (1940–2009), US author of short stories – also sf novels under the house name Alex McDonough – died on 21 October aged 68. She was best known for her writers' market report *Scavenger's Newsletter* (1984–2003).



Robert Holdstock (1948–2009), UK author of many notable sf, fantasy and horror novels, died on 29 November after a brief and shockingly unexpected illness. He was only 61. Most of his finest work is part of or linked to the Mythago cycle, opening with *Mythago Wood* (1984) – a World Fantasy and BSFA Award winner – and dealing with powerfully re-imagined mythic archetypes inhabiting an English heartwood infinitely larger inside than out. Losing Rob leaves a huge, aching hole in the British sf scene.

Karl Kroeber (1926–2009), US literary academic who wrote the nonfiction *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1988), died on 8 November. He was Ursula K. Le Guin's brother.

Buddy Martinez, co-founding editor of *Iniquities* magazine, sometime co-publisher at Gauntlet Press, and author of short horror stories, hanged himself on 30 November.

William Miller (1934–2009), UK publisher in the 1960s/1970s and later a Japan-based literary agent, died on 5 November aged 75. He was responsible for publishing much sf, including J.G. Ballard, while he ran Panther Books (later Granada).

David C. Smith, US scholar in several disciplines including the life of H.G. Wells – of whom his *Desperately Mortal* (1986) is a notable biography – died on 7 November.

Ed Valigursky (1926–2009), US artist who in the 1950s and 1960s painted many sf covers for *Amazing*, *Fantastic*, Ace Books (especially Doubles) and other publishers, died on 7 September; he was 82.



JASON SANFORD

ILLUSTRATED BY BEN BALDWIN

The names of dying sailors washed across Amber Tolester in a sea of rainbow-lit letters. When the ships of Windspur languished in port during the doldrums of summer, the names lay cold-blue and exhausted on her skin. When autumn's gales churned the seas to crash and foam, the names burned red in response. And when a sailor on any of Windspur's ships was washed away, or crushed by tackle, or drowned in the endless depths, Amber screamed as that sailor's white-hot name burned into her body, leaving the other names to wonder which would next fall for the sea's slippery embrace.

No one in Windspur could explain Amber's fate. The port's more pious citizens proclaimed Amber a warning to sinners that life was short and damnation eternal. The less pious whispered that Amber paid for the sins of her parents, who had been shop keeps until their untimely deaths a decade before. Depending on the tale, Amber's mother had either spurned a sailor's true love – cheating on him even as he drowned in a great hurricane – or Amber's father had jumped ship at the last minute. For want of a full crew, his ship was lost.

Once every month, Amber walked to the church rectory, where she disrobed in front of Mrs Andercoust, the town's oldest widow. Mrs Andercoust wrote down the names on Amber's skin, compared those names with previous lists, and noted with sadness any missing names. Ship owners and captains used the widow's lists to balance their crews, never wanting too many named sailors on one ship. And woe be to any sailor who asked for his true love's hand in marriage without first confessing that he was among the named.

And so Amber Tolester grew to hate her life. She covered

Amber frowned. While she understood the fervor the widow devoted to the names – like most widows in town, Mrs Andercoust had lost her husband to the sea – Amber hated it when Mrs Andercoust saw her as nothing but an empty canvas for the sailors' deaths. Still, Amber figured Mrs Andercoust's work tracking the names helped people, so she bit her tongue to keep from saying anything nasty.

When Amber left the rectory, she walked the long way home, enjoying the cool spring breeze blowing from the bay and the morning sunshine bouncing off the damp cobblestones and slate-roof buildings. Outside a boutique, Amber stopped and gazed longingly at a collection of popular sun dresses newly arrived from London. Amber glanced at her reflection in the window – at her hideously brown old maid's dress, at the long sleeves and gloves she wore to hide the names. She wished she could wear sun dresses without attracting attention.

With a sigh, she turned to walk on. However, a middle-aged woman blocked the sidewalk. When Amber tried to step around her, the woman spat at her feet.

With a start, Amber recognized the woman as the mother of Clyde Oldman, who'd drowned last year. Amber tried to walk away, but the woman followed her. "You're a vile, evil thing," the woman yelled. "You should have drowned with your parents."

Before Amber could respond, the woman's husband raced over and grabbed his wife's arm. "My apologies, Miss Tolester," he said, hustling his wife away. "She doesn't mean anything by it." But his abrupt tone told Amber the husband agreed with his wife.

Once the woman was gone, Amber noticed the passersby

INTO THE DEPTHS OF ILLUMINATED SEAS

herself in long dresses and gloves and prayed every day for the names to disappear. More than once she walked to the harbor breakwater and considered jumping into the churning ocean waves. All that stopped her was the ironic knowledge that without being named on her skin, she wasn't fated to die at sea.

Shortly after Amber turned twenty-five, a new name appeared on her skin: David Sahr. Mrs Andercoust discovered the name glowing in cold blue light across the middle of Amber's back. As Amber pulled her clothes back on, shivering from the rectory's chilly drafts, Mrs Andercoust cackled about the discovery.

"No David Sahr has been born in the last month," Mrs Andercoust said, leafing through the church's baptismal record. "And the only David Sahr I remember left Windspur when he was a child."

Amber buttoned the front of her dress, smiling as the name of Billy Martin swam across her right breast. As a teenager she'd often dreamed of Billy caressing her breasts, although not in this manner. She watched Billy's name for another moment until a cough from Mrs Andercoust brought her back to the issue at hand. "Perhaps this David Sahr changed his name," Amber suggested.

"Doesn't work like that. Change their name all they want. If they're on your skin, the sea will take them."

who had paused to watch the encounter. "What are you looking at?" she screamed. Then, nearly in tears, Amber ran back to her store, wondering if fate had purposely left her face free of names so everyone could easily see how much she hated her life.

That night an unseasonably powerful storm blew in from the sea. From Amber's apartment above her store, she watched the waves pound the harbor's breakwater. But while the names on her body crashed in tune with the gale, none burned red. Amber always felt the deaths of sailors minutes or hours in advance, as their names grew hotter and hotter and brighter and brighter. For now, all the names merely warmed her skin, meaning their deaths were far in the future. Amber climbed into bed and fell asleep, happy there'd be no deaths on her conscience tonight.

The next day, as Amber swept broken branches and smashed slate fragments from the front of her store, she heard people yelling at the docks. Amber walked over to find the *Simply*, a 1,000 ton sailing trawler, limping into port. One of the trawler's masts was broken and the ship listed heavily to port. The crowd at the docks parted when they saw Amber – some people happy to see her, others appalled.

"Oh, Miss Tolester, Miss Tolester," a sailor onboard yelled when the trawler reached the piers. Without waiting for the gangplank, he jumped from the ship to the dock and fell at Amber's feet.

"Bless you, Miss Tolester. When that storm hit, I would have lost faith except my best mate Bonder wasn't on your skin. I stayed close to him and sure enough, here I am, safe and sound."

Amber didn't know what to say. The sailor at her feet was Miles O'Shaughnessy, who was among the named. And she knew Jack Bonder – he'd gone to school with her and wasn't named. As more sailors walked off the *Simply*, they crowded around Amber, adding their praise and touching her like a sacred totem. As always, Amber marveled at this behavior. Every sailor who survived a storm or accident praised her. If they weren't named on her body, that was why they survived. If they were named, they survived because their time had yet to come. Living sailors loved Amber while the dead voiced few complaints.

Happy all the sailors had survived, Amber tried to leave, but Miles stopped her. "My lady, we have a gift for you," he said. He and the other sailors led Amber to the gangplank, where a tall sailor Amber didn't know was carried to the dock on a stretcher. At first Amber thought the gift was behind the unconscious sailor, but she realized they meant the sailor himself.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," Amber stammered.

Miles O'Shaughnessy frowned. "Isn't he a friend of yours? He's been delirious since we've found him floating in a half-destroyed lifeboat. Keeps muttering your name over and over."

Amber stared at the unconscious sailor's peaceful face. She'd never seen this man before. But before she could say so, Miles handed Amber a tiny silver and glass frame. "He had that in his pocket," Miles said.

Amber glanced at the tiny picture, which fit easily in the palm of her gloved hand. The daguerreotype showed Amber standing on the bow of a ship. Amber tried to convince herself that the picture merely showed another woman who resembled her, but then she turned it over. There, etched into the silver backing, were the words TO AMBER TOLESTER, WITH ETERNAL LOVE. DAVID SAHR.

As Amber watched the unconscious sailor being carried to the port's small hospital, a shiver rocked the names flowing her skin. David Sahr. That was the new name on her body.

That night, Amber couldn't sleep. She stared at the daguerreotype over and over, trying to tease details from the black and white image. In the picture Amber wore pants and a short sleeve shirt and stood on the deck of a small sailing cutter. Behind her, a man dangled by his neck from a rope slung over the yardarm, his face swollen and blurry. Amber had heard of captains hanging mutineers and pirates like that, but such a deed hadn't been done in decades.

Another strange thing about the daguerreotype – aside from the hanged man and the fact that Amber had never taken the picture – was that no names were visible on her bare arms. Even more shocking were the words from David Sahr expressing his eternal love. Amber wanted to race to the hospital and force this stranger to explain why he dared state his love for someone he'd never met. She felt both violated and excited by Sahr's words.

The next day she visited the hospital to confront this David Sahr. To her surprise, two constables stood outside his door.

"May I help you, Miss Tolester?" the older constable, a giant man named Samuels, asked. Constable Samuels had never liked Amber because he was named on her body, even though he

wasn't a sailor.

"I want to see David Sahr."

Samuels glanced at the other constable, who was Billy Martin, the boy she'd had a crush on back in school. They'd even sneaked a kiss once during a family beach trip. But then Amber's parents died and Billy – along with the rest of Windspur – learned what the names on her body meant. Since then, Billy hadn't given her more than a passing glance.

"Why would you wish to see our dear Mr Sahr?" Constable Samuels asked.

"One of the *Simply*'s sailors said Sahr was speaking my name when they found him."

Constable Samuels' mouth opened in shock. "Wait. Is Sahr named on your skin?"

"Yes."

Billy grabbed Samuels' arm. "Does that mean he'll escape us?" Billy asked. "How can he die at sea when he's to hang?"

Constable Samuels shook his head, unsure himself.

"What did he do?" Amber asked.

"He's a wrecker," Samuels said. "The Receiver of Wrecks has a warrant on him for setting up false lights along rocky coasts and luring ships to their doom. There's also rumor he's into piracy, but we've no evidence of that. But wrecking's enough to hang for. Of course, if he's to die at sea, I don't know what that means about him taking to a rope anytime soon."

"Maybe it means he's innocent," Amber suggested.

Samuels laughed, obviously not believing that, and told Amber she couldn't see Mr Sahr. Amber tried to catch Billy's eye, but he refused to look at her. Angry and dejected, she pushed Billy away and stormed out of the hospital.

After leaving the hospital, Amber visited Richard Beard, a long-time friend of her parents who ran a photography studio only a few blocks from Amber's store. When she showed Beard the daguerreotype, he was instantly fascinated.

"A fine specimen," he said, shifting the silver-backed glass frame in his hands. "Macabre, but a fine specimen."

"Really? The hanged man's face is blurry."

Richard Beard shook his head and led Amber to the back wall of his studio. Hundred of photographs hung there – a mix of daguerreotypes, tintypes, and the new albumen prints, which had become trendy of late because their small *carte de viste* prints were so cheap. Almost all the photos were of sailors and their wives and girlfriends, and many of the sailors' portraits were framed in black.

"The problem with daguerreotypes is exposures take almost a minute," Beard said. "Creating a picture outside is dicey, more so on a ship. The fact that only the man's face blurred indicates either extreme luck or skill on the photographer's part. For myself, I only use the *daguerre* process for landscapes or studio portraits – and for portraits, I require a back brace to hold the subject still."

"Then why take a picture that way?"

"Well, a properly sealed daguerreotype can last forever, which is more than I can say about those little *carte de viste* prints everyone wants these days."

Before Amber left, she asked if it was possible to manipulate a daguerreotype's image. Richard Beard again glanced at the

daguerreotype, obviously seeing that Amber's skin was free of the names. He shook his head.

"The image is too delicate. That's why we seal them in glass – the faintest touch destroys them."

Amber thanked the man and returned to her shop, still brooding over both the daguerreotype and David Sahr.

For the next few days Amber tried over and over to see David Sahr, only to have Samuels and Billy continually stop her. From the hospital nurses Amber learned that Sahr was in a fever-induced delirium, but expected to recover. Of course, he would then hang for his crimes. But as the nurses said, that was a matter between Sahr and his God, not them.

Amber also learned more about this David Sahr. His ancestors had lived in Windspur for hundreds of years, always working as sailors. When Sahr was ten, his father died at sea. Shortly after, Sahr and his mother moved away. In the four decades since, no one in Windspur heard anything about Sahr until reports reached constables that he was wrecking ships.

On the fifth day after the *Simply* reached port, the winds picked up, the barometer fell, and a light rain pattered across the roof tiles. By evening the winds howled as fat drops of rain rapped on the windows.

Amber was undressing for bed when two names began burning in red fire across her breasts – Constable Samuels and Billy. Amber ran to her balcony window and stared at the harbor. Because of the building storm, most ships had come in early. Why would Samuels and Billy try to sail on a night like this? Uncertain, but wanting to warn the two men, Amber grabbed her rain coat and ran to the harbor.

She found the harbor deserted, even the night watchman having retreated in the face of the storm. The ships jumped and splashed alongside the slick docks. Beyond the edge of the harbor Amber saw massive waves crashing on the breakwater.

Then she heard a gunshot.

Amber crept warily toward the sound and found Constable Samuels and David Sahr wrestling on the main pier beside a mid-sized cutter. Samuels had the size advantage and straddled Sahr, pounding the sailor's head over and over with his large fists. Unsure what to do, Amber stepped back and tripped over a body – Billy – sprawled beside a fish cleaning table. He reached for her as blood poured from a gunshot wound to his head. Amber pressed her hand over the wound. Billy gripped her arm for a second before passing out.

Amber looked up to see Constable Samuels tying Sahr's hands with rope, the peaceful face Sahr had shown while unconscious replaced with lines of hate and rage.

"How's Billy?" Constable Samuels yelled over the wind.

"Still breathing," she said. "I think the bullet only grazed his skull."

Samuels finished tying Sahr's hand together, kicked the captive man, and picked up a fallen eight-barrel pepper-box pistol. Keeping the pistol pointed at Sahr, Samuels walked over to examine his wounded partner. Suddenly, a large wave slammed into the pier, knocking Amber and Samuels over and washing Billy into the waters below. Amber scrambled to the edge of the pier and grabbed Billy's shirt just as he went under. She felt his name burning white hot on her skin as the sea screamed to take

him from her.

Amber yelled for Samuels to help, but when she glanced back she saw Sahr had used the confusion to fight back. The wrecker straddled the constable, Sahr's bound hands slamming Samuels head into a piling. The constable moaned as Sahr shoved him into the surging waters below, causing Samuel's name to spark fire through Amber's shirt and raincoat. But she ignored the pain, desperate not to lose her grip on Billy.

"Help me," she yelled at Sahr. "I can't pull him up by myself."

Sahr glanced down at the waves beneath the pier and shook his head. He picked up Samuels' pistol, holding it between his still-bound hands. He told Amber to let go of Billy and come with him.

"What?"

"We're fated to be together. Let go of him."

Amber glared at Sahr. "No."

Sahr shook his head angrily and pointed the pistol at Amber. She glanced at Billy, who was now awake from the shock of the surging sea. He stared in fear and pawed at the pier, too weak to pull himself up. She didn't need to feel Billy's burning name to know he was begging her not to let him die.

"Last chance," Sahr said.

"No."

To Amber's surprise, Sahr didn't pull the trigger. Instead, he smiled before hitting her across the head with the pistol butt.

Amber drifted in and out of consciousness, unsure if she was dreaming or awake. She dimly remembered Sahr jumping into a small cutter tied to the dock and sailing into the gale force winds. She remembered Samuels' name burning deep into her body as the constable drowned. But where she expected to feel the fire of Billy's death, she instead felt a gentle kiss like the one they'd shared so long ago during their ill-fated beach trip.

She cried at the memory, wishing she hadn't gone on that damned trip. A week earlier she'd turned sixteen and discovered her body crawling with names – including those of her parents. But instead of telling anyone, she'd covered herself in long robes and stayed in her room, pretending to be sick.

Her parents worried about her, but Amber was too ashamed to tell them the truth, fearing they'd think her possessed by some devil. Then one morning her mother knocked on her bedroom door.

"Honey," her mother said with a conspirator's smirk. "Billy's downstairs. He and his mother have invited us on a beach trip."

Amber knew her mother had set this up, but she didn't want to turn Billy down. She was also amazed her mother was willing to go to the beach. Amber's mom had always been deathly afraid of water.

So Amber and her parents joined the Martins at the beach. Amber wore her longest swimming dress, full-length sleeves and gloves, and so much body powder she continually fought back sneezes. They ate a picnic lunch, searched for seashells, and had a wonderful time. Amber even overheard Mrs Martin say how impressed she was with Amber for being so modestly dressed.

As the sun neared the horizon, Amber's father walked up to his waist in the surf. He teased Amber's mother, asking her to join him, but she merely shook her head and laughed nervously as Mrs Martin stood beside her. With their parents distracted,

Billy reached for Amber's gloved hand and kissed her on the cheek. Amber blushed and turned her lips to Billy, but before they could kiss again Amber's mother screamed.

She turned to see her father struggling in the surf against a powerful rip current which hadn't been there moments before. He'd already been pulled a dozen yards out to sea. Amber started to run toward him, but suddenly doubled over as pain burned her body. When she looked up, she saw her mother – despite her fear of the water – running into the sea. When she reached Amber's father, the burning on Amber's skin lessened for a moment. But then they both disappeared beneath the waves and their names burned through Amber's clothes, scorching both her body and soul.

When the pain finally stopped, Amber looked up to see Billy and his mother staring at her in shock, their eyes reading the letters now singed across Amber's clothes. Billy reached for her, but his mother stopped him and, Amber noticed, Billy didn't resist very hard. And when Billy's mother asked if her son's name was also on Amber's body, all Amber could do was nod.

A fisherman found her parents' bodies the next day, their arms locked in a stiff hug. Amber cried for months over that beach trip, wishing she'd ignored Billy and told her parents about the names. Wishing she'd known beforehand what the names meant.

Wishing she could be as brave as her mother.

Amber dreamed all through the storm and woke the next morning in the hospital, warm sunlight flooding her room and the curtains rippling to the gentle sea breeze. Two doctors and a nurse stood beside her, fussing over the lump on her head as if it was the most important wound they'd ever attended.

Amber soon learned why they were so concerned – she was a hero. Several townsfolk had heard the gunshots. When they reached the pier, they found Amber lying unconscious beside Billy. They also saw Sahr sailing away, his tiny cutter tacking left and right directly into the wind.

Even though the doctors told Amber to stay in bed, she couldn't sit still when she heard Billy was alive. She pushed everyone out of her room and closed the door, searching her body for Billy's name. It was gone! She'd changed his fate!

That afternoon, Amber visited Billy in his hospital room. Billy's head was bandaged, but the bullet had simply grazed his head and the doctors said he should recover. Billy smiled weakly and thanked her. Amber wasn't sure how she'd managed to pull Billy out of the water after Sahr hit her in the head, but she was glad he'd survived. Feeling daring, she reached out to hold Billy's hand.

Because she wore a hospital gown, the sailors' names crawled down her bare arms and mingled around their interlocked hands. But Billy merely smiled and pretended not to notice.

Amber soon recovered enough to leave the hospital. To her surprise, a large crowd greeted her outside her dry goods store. Several women who'd lost husbands and sons to the sea hugged her – including the old woman who'd spit at her a few weeks back. Amber stammered her thanks and tried not to look shocked.

In the weeks that followed, people continued to treat her with, if not outright kindness, at least courtesy. While shoppers

at her dry goods store still stared at the few bits of flesh Amber couldn't keep covered, no one glared with hostility. Everyone knew Amber had saved Billy's life. Better yet, Mrs Andercoust confirmed that Billy's name was no longer on Amber's skin, giving hope to the families of other named sailors that perhaps they too could dodge fate.

When Billy was released from the hospital, Amber walked him home. They talked of little things – how nice the breeze felt, how the clouds scudded so quietly across the sky. When they reached Billy's home he kissed her gently on the cheek.

Amber walked in a happy daze all the way back to her shop.

Soon Amber began seeing Billy Martin on a regular basis. Amber still didn't care for Billy's mother – she'd never forgotten the hatred on the woman's face when she learned Billy's name was on Amber's skin. However, Billy's mother now acted like Amber was the finest lady on earth and invited Amber to every Sunday dinner. Afterward Amber and Billy took long walks along the harbor, where sailors waved at the young couple.

During one of their walks they stopped at an ice lolly vendor. As they sat on a park bench eating bites of cherry ice, Billy asked Amber what she wanted to do with her life.

"I want to spend the rest of my life in a dry goods store," she said sarcastically.

Billy laughed. "Seriously," he said.

Amber smiled. "I'm not sure. All I've ever truly wanted is for the names to leave my body." She held up her hand so he could see the names flowing around her fingers. For a moment, Amber was afraid she'd been too honest. "What about you?" she quickly asked.

"I want to do something important. Something that really matters. Solve the big crime. Catch some infamous murderer. Save someone's life."

Amber started to ask why Billy hadn't tried to save her father's life all those years ago, but she remembered how his mother had held Billy back, not wanting to risk his death in the sea. As if Billy knew what she was thinking, he coughed and changed the subject. "Isn't there anything else you've longed for?" he asked.

"I would say to fall in love, but that wish has come true."

Billy squeezed her hand gently and smiled.

That spring was the best of Amber's life. She and Billy spent all their free time together. Even better, not a single sailor in Windspur died, so Amber's skin was still and quiet.

Then the killings started.

Amber felt the first killing on a bright Sunday morning when a name suddenly disappeared from her skin. However, instead of first burning white hot the name simply vanished with a sensuous kiss.

Amber was still trying to figure out what had happened when another name vanished with a kiss, followed by a third and fourth. Amber remembered how Billy's name disappeared from her body with the same sensation and hoped this meant the men were no longer fated to die at sea. However, she was unsure, so she closed her store and hurried to tell Mrs Andercoust.

The widow opened up her ledger. "They're all sailing on the *Pendercast*," she said. "Left yesterday for a week-long fishing trip to the shoals."

"Does this means they're safe, like Billy?"

Mrs Andercoust shook her head. "I don't know. Perhaps we should tell the captains who are still in port. Outbound ships can keep an eye out for the *Pendercast* and see what happened to the sailors."

Amber nodded, figuring they wouldn't know for sure until next week. But to her surprise, the following day the *Pendercast* sailed into harbor. News quickly spread that they'd been attacked by pirates, who'd killed four members of the crew.

That night Billy and the *Pendercast's* captain stopped by to see Amber. Captain Zeller took off his hat and bowed to Amber before they sat down at her dining-room table.

"We thought the ship needed help," Captain Zeller said. "Just floating over the shoals, no cloth up except one shredded staysail. The crew waved at us so we pulled alongside. That's when they attacked. Seven of them, including David Sahr, all armed with Brown Bess muskets and sabers. We didn't stand a chance."

Amber felt sick.

"After we were tied up, Sahr walked down the line, asking each of my men his name. He then shot four of them in the back of the head."

Captain Zeller held his hat to his chest and shook his head, tears tumbling from his eyes. Billy thanked him for coming and showed him to the door. When he returned, he told Amber that Captain Zeller had recognized the other men in Sahr's crew. "They're all named sailors," Billy said. "Every one of them."

"How did Sahr get Mrs Andercoust's list?"

"I don't know. But he left this with Captain Zeller." Billy pulled a tiny glass daguerreotype out of his coat pocket. The picture was similar to the one she'd seen before, except Amber was now the one hanging by the neck from the mast. The names of sailors still burned across her skin. And the face of the man with her on the tiny cutter wasn't blurry – he was crisp and clear and definitely David Sahr.

Etched into the silver backing of this frame were the words "We died for Amber Tolester."

Amber shivered. "I have another one of these," she said. When she showed it to Billy, he shook his head in puzzlement.

"I don't understand," Billy muttered as he looked at the first daguerreotype. "Where did the names on your skin go?"

"I don't know. I asked Richard Beard if it's possible to alter a daguerreotype. He said no."

Billy stared closely at the two daguerreotypes. "So you've never taken these pictures?"

"No."

"And you don't know Sahr?"

"No. I first saw him when he was carried off the *Simply*." She paused, wishing she'd shown her daguerreotype to Billy months ago, because it now looked like she'd been hiding it from him. "But there is something I need to tell you. The night I pulled you from the sea, Sahr said he and I were fated to be together. When I refused to let you drown and go with Sahr, he knocked me out."

"You didn't save me."

"What?"

"I mean, you did save me – by grabbing me after that wave hit. But when Sahr knocked you out, I fell back into the sea. Sahr's the one who pulled me back out. Ever since, I've been trying to

figure out why. Maybe he thought he was helping you..."

Billy shrugged, as if he didn't understand his own line of reasoning.

When Billy left, he kissed Amber warmly on the cheek and said he'd take care of everything. But enough doubt existed in his eyes for Amber to remember the first time they'd kissed – and how he'd simply disappeared from her life after being named.

As the door closed, she hurled all the curses she knew at David Sahr.

Over the next few months, David Sahr and his pirates struck three more times. The first time, they attacked like before, waiting until a ship approached and executing every named sailor. After that, none of Windspur's fleet would go near unknown ships, so Sahr attacked at night without warning. He and his pirates overran the ships and killed anyone who stood up to them. Sahr would then find each named survivor and kill them too.

Sahr always left behind one of two daguerreotypes of Amber. In the first, Amber stood at the helm of a ship, Sahr dead and hanging from the mast. In the other, he piloted the ship while she hung dead.

The navy sent a frigate to patrol the waters, but found no sign of Sahr. Billy also rode on several of Windspur's fishing vessels, hoping Sahr would strike. But again, no such luck.

Finally, the owners of Windspur's ships stopped hiring named sailors.

The night the policy was announced, someone threw a burning brand through the front window of Amber's store. She doused the fire before it spread. In the morning she hammered wood across the broken window while her neighbors glared angrily at her. She was still cleaning up when Billy stopped by.

"Are we having dinner tomorrow at your mother's house?" Amber asked. The previous week's Sunday dinner had been extremely awkward. The kindness Billy's mother had shown her was now gone, and Amber knew the attack on her store wouldn't help matters.

"Perhaps we shouldn't," Billy said. "I'd rather enjoy your company than spend our time fighting Mother. How about a picnic at the park?"

Amber hugged Billy and spent all evening preparing food for the outing. But the next morning, Billy didn't show up. After waiting for several hours, Amber finally barged over to Billy's house, figuring his mother was trying to turn him against her. Instead, she found the woman in tears.

"He's gone," Billy's mother said, holding a now-familiar glass-framed daguerreotype. "They took him, and it's all your fault."

Amber snatched the picture from the mother's hand. It showed Amber hanging dead, the names burning her arms and neck. On the back were the words, "Waiting for you. David Sahr."

That afternoon, Amber talked with Mrs Andercoust. That night, Amber walked to a popular sailor's bar near the docks, which no proper lady would be caught dead inside. But Amber no longer cared what other people thought of her.

When the sailors saw Amber, they glared in silence. Because the fishing fleet was at sea, these men were all named and no longer able to be hired. Among them sat Miles O'Shaughnessy.

"I'm going to find Sahr," Amber said. "Who's willing?"

The sailors continued to glare at Amber. She wore work pants and a short sleeve shirt, their names clearly visible in cold-blue light along her arms and neck.

"What are you talking about, Miss Tolester?" Miles asked. "No ship will have us, let alone carry the woman Sahr's angry at."

"I have a ship. Mrs Andercoust gave me permission to take her late husband's trawler. And I'm not looking for volunteers. I'm paying for able bodied sailors."

At the mention of pay, the sailors talked excitedly among themselves. Most had known and respected Captain Andercoust, and were impressed his widow would lend Amber his ship. Still, Miles O'Shaughnessy spoke for all of them when he asked Amber what she intended to do if she found Sahr.

"I'm going to kill him."

As Amber knew only too well, sailors were a superstitious lot. The thought of sailing with so many cursed men – and worse, with a woman – kept most of them off her ship. It didn't help that Amber had no sea experience. Still, she found eight willing men and hoped they'd be enough.

She picked Miles O'Shaughnessy as her first mate, much to his surprise. The two of them then surveyed Mrs Andercoust's ship. Since her husband's death, the twin mast trawler had lain on a beach near the widow's house. The ship was covered in seagull droppings, badly needed a new coat of paint, and the tack had dry rotted away. Miles wrote up a list of needed supplies and repairs.

"It's a long list," he said. "Will the bank lend you this much?"

"Doesn't matter. I'm selling my store."

If Miles disapproved, he didn't let on.

Amber and her sailors spent two weeks readying the *Andercoust* and stocking it with supplies. While Amber hated the delay, she knew sailing on an unsafe ship would risk the lives of her men. So she simply prayed Sahr wouldn't harm Billy before she reached him.

The night before they set sail, Amber paced the ship's empty deck. Her heart pounded at the thought of actually going to sea. Did her mother feel this way when she'd tried to rescue Amber's father?

Miles had suggested Amber give a speech to the men in the morning, something to inspire them and still their fear. However, as Amber tried to think of something to say, she realized Miles was wrong. The only words which mattered were the names on her body – and they only mattered in what she did with them.

Morning broke to a fiery red sunrise, meaning a big storm blowing in. Because storms were unusual this time of year, Amber briefly wondered if the sea was trying to stop her mission. But when Miles suggested they delay their trip for a few days, Amber said they were leaving immediately. She held her arm up to his eyes and showed Miles his name. "If any of you are going to die, I'll know," she said. "Trust me. I won't let it happen."

Neither Miles nor the other sailors said a word as the *Andercoust* set sail.

Once at sea, Miles piloted the trawler and Amber stood to the right of the wheel, tightly gripping the guardrail. The first rains broke across the bow by noon; by midafternoon, the winds neared gale strength. They passed a number of Windspur's ships

racing for the safety of harbor. Miles asked Amber if they should return to port, but Amber told him to continue sailing toward deep water. She knew if any other captain had said those words, Miles would have likely ignored the command and turned for home. Instead, Miles glanced once at the fire-red names flowing around Amber's neck and nodded.

By nightfall, the wind blew at gale strength and Miles ordered everyone to tie on their lifelines. Miles suggested Amber retire to her cabin, but she refused and continued to stand by the wheel.

The storm raged for two days. Miles and the sailors worked nonstop to keep the boat afloat. At first Amber stood as before, her hands paste white as they gripped the railing. But as the storm's intensity grew, and the names of her sailors burned hotter and hotter on her body, her fear lessened. Around midnight, a massive wall of dark water appeared in front of the ship as two of the sailor's names flashed white hot on Amber's skin and burned through her rain coat. She ran to the men and shoved them to the other side of the ship. When the massive wave washed over the deck, an unseen piece of debris smashed the spot where the sailors had been standing. If the debris had hit them, they would have been lost. Instead, their white hot names merely faded to red.

Amber returned to the wheel as more of the names burned hot. She ordered Miles to turn the ship in a new direction, which he did, then to raise and lower certain sails. He initially asked why they needed to do this, but after her first response – that if he didn't the men would die – Miles obeyed her orders without question.

By the second day of the storm, the sailors eyed Amber as if Neptune himself was their captain. They both worshipped and feared her, immediately obeying when Amber told the sailors to secure certain tackle or to change course. They could see their names burning brightly on her skin; they smelled the smoke when their names burned through Amber's clothes.

On the third day, the storm stopped. Amber leaned against the mizzen mast, exhausted, as Miles and the other sailors gathered around her. All of the sailors fell to their knees before her.

"Miss Tolester," Miles said. "If a week ago anyone had said this ship could survive a storm like that, I'd have knocked them cold for lying. I'll follow you anywhere, ma'am." The other sailors nodded agreement, and brought Amber food and water, and unburned clothes, and carried her to her cabin to rest.

And with that, Amber knew they were ready to find David Sahr.

They sailed for days, zigzagging back and forth across the waters. Amber could feel David Sahr's cold-fire name tugging her forward, as if the name begged to reunite with its namesake.

At the beginning of their second week at sea, the *Andercoust* sailed under a full-moon night. Amber slept in her cabin until waking with a start as Sahr's name burned red on her skin. She raced to the deck and stared across the dark sea. On the horizon she saw the briefest flicker of sails in the moonlight. "Ship to starboard," she yelled. "It's Sahr."

Miles cursed. Sahr's ship was bearing down on them with the wind to its back. "Do we run or meet him, Miss Tolester?" he asked. "He's got the weather gage."

Amber wasn't sure. She'd never felt so many names burning

red at once – not only Sahr's name, but also the names of Sahr's men and Amber's own crew. It was almost as if the sea wanted to sink their ships so it could claim them all. While she didn't care if Sahr and his men died, she wasn't going to risk her crew.

"We run for now," she said. "He's got the advantage."

For the next twelve hours they ran, sailing downwind with as many sails as their ship could bear. However, the *Andercoust* was a fishing trawler and not made for speed, while Sahr's ship was the same small cutter he'd stolen from Windspur months ago. By the time dawn glowed on the horizon, Amber knew they couldn't outrun Sahr. She watched his ship through a scope. He had one fewer man than Amber, but they were all armed. She also saw Billy, who was tied to the mast and looked half-dead. With her body burning to the coming deaths, Amber broke open the box of rifles and pistols she'd purchased and handed them to the crew. None needed reminding what they had to do. If it came to the worst, Miles was to ram Sahr's ship, taking them all to their deaths.

However, when Sahr sailed near their ship, he waved a white flag.

"A trade," he yelled. "Billy boy for Miss Tolester."

Miles protested, but Amber hissed him to silence. Until this moment, her skin had been nothing but pain at the coming deaths. Now, only the names of Sahr and his men burned. If she exchanged herself for Billy, Miles and the rest of her men would reach home safely.

Without another word, Sahr and his men tied up alongside the *Andercoust*. They tossed Billy, unconscious and bound like a gutted fish, onto the fishing trawler's deck. Amber leaned over Billy – he still breathed. She kissed him, and assured Miles she'd be safe as she stepped onto Sahr's ship.

When Sahr cut the ropes and sailed away from the *Andercoust*, Amber smiled at him.

"I'm going to kill you," she said.

"Wouldn't have it any other way," he said with a chuckle.

Amber and David Sahr sailed west. At first the *Andercoust* followed, but when it became apparent Miles and his crew couldn't catch them the fishing trawler headed back toward Windspur.

Sahr laughed as the *Andercoust* sailed out of sight. "I should have put them out of their misery. Not that I won't get another chance. After all, you've given them no choice but to die out here."

"I didn't pick them to die," Amber said, noticing Sahr's sailors were listening in. She was tempted to tell Sahr that if she chose sailors to die, she would have picked him and his crew. But since they were already named on her skin – and were also murderers – she felt it better not to raise this point. "The names simply appear."

"You think so?" Sahr asked. He grabbed Amber by the arm and dragged her across the deck to a tall, middle-aged sailor. Amber dimly remembered the man from her childhood; he'd been one of the endless itinerant sailors who'd passed by her parents' shop each morning. "This is Angus McPhee. Once you named him, he couldn't find work as an honest sailor. At least, not until I taught him to forget the 'honest' part."

The sailors laughed. Sahr, though, glared at Amber. "Where's his name?" he demanded. When Amber didn't respond, Sahr

pulled her right arm out and searched through the blue-fire letters for Angus' name. When he didn't find it, he pulled up Amber's shirt before she shoved him back, causing the crew to laugh even harder. Knowing she had only one chance to take control of the situation, Amber pointed to her right breast. "Your name is right there," she told Angus as white-hot letters suddenly burned through her shirt. "Your name is written in the bullet which hits you in the chest, and knocks you into the sea to drown."

The laughter stopped. Amber turned to another sailor. "You are Robert Allen," she said, pointing to a new name which suddenly flared up on her leg and scorched her pants. "You will die gasping for breath in a storm-tossed sea." She turned to another sailor. "You are William Douglas-Home. You will die when you fall overboard after drinking too much rum."

As the sailors stared, Amber walked among them naming their fates. She had never been around men whose deaths burned so clearly. She knew everything about these men. Knew how desperately they yearned to escape their fate. Knew that despite all their prayers and pleas, the only thing awaiting them at sea was cold and depth and eternity.

Finally, she stepped back to David Sahr. "As for you," she said, a massive name igniting around her neck in the purest of white light. "The sea's been waiting a long time to take you. Once it gets you, your death will make all the other deaths seem pleasant."

Sahr smashed her in the face, sending her sprawling across the deck. "We're not slaves to this bitch's skin," Sahr yelled.

"True," Amber said, blood gushing from her split lip. "Billy was also fated to die at sea. But I saved him and he's no longer named on my skin. I can save all of you. But hurt me, and you're dead."

Sahr smiled, and for a moment Amber saw him as he'd first appeared – the handsome, unconscious sailor who seemed at peace with the world. Then his face churned back to anger and he yelled for his men to lock her in the cutter's storage hold.

Sahr sailed for two days with Amber locked in the dark hold, her only light a single porthole and the names burning on her body. Sahr alternated between bribery and threats to convince her to remove their names from her skin. Amber, though, noticed that Sahr never carried through on his threats. That, combined with how his crew treated her, bringing her food and water and unburned clothes, told her his power over the sailors was limited. As long as they feared her, she would be safe.

On the third night, the cutter sailed under a clear sky, the moonlight pushing the sea down as if a child had coated everything in the smoothest of milk. The sailors were silent as the cutter chased a fishing trawler through the night. Amber knew what was about to happen – Angus McPhee's name had been burning white fire for the last hour – but she kept quiet until the ship pulled alongside the trawler.

Suddenly, gunshots raked Sahr and his men. Through a porthole, Amber saw several constables on the fishing trawler shooting at them. Bullets exploded through the cargo hold and ricocheted around Amber, who felt a sense of calm as she watched moonlight pour through the new holes.

After a few more shots, Sahr yelled for his men to cast off. The cutter sliced through the seas, racing downwind as the con-

stables continued to fire. Finally, after a half-hour of chase, the trawler's gunfire stopped.

One of the sailors smashed open the lock on the cargo hold and pulled Amber out. Several sailors were wounded, and Amber saw that Angus was missing, no doubt hit by a bullet and thrown overboard, just as she'd foreseen.

She walked across the deck to where two sailors held down William Douglas-Home, who screamed and cried from a bullet in his leg.

"Is he going to die?" one of the sailors asked.

Amber nodded. "Yes, but not from this bullet wound. And if you do what I say, none of you need die for many years to come."

At that, David Sahr ran screaming at her with a pistol in his hand. But before he could shoot Amber he was tackled by the other sailors. "Let me go," he screamed. "She's done this to us. Her. Just her." But the sailors ignored Sahr and hog-tied him beside the main mast.

Amber landed the sailors fifty leagues to the west of Windspur, with each man swearing a solemn oath by her skin never to return to the sea. As the men waded to the beach, Amber felt most of their names disappear from her body with a kiss. However, the name of one sailor remained, although he no longer burned as fiercely. Amber knew that man would one day break his vow and return to the only life he knew, but there was nothing she could do about that.

Amber turned the cutter back toward Windspur and ran with the wind. She had never piloted a cutter before, but had learned a lot from Miles and her other sailors. As long as good weather held, she shouldn't have much trouble. David Sahr – still tied up beside the main mast – critiqued her every move. When Amber almost swamped the cutter by taking a wave sideways, he laughed.

"That's what happens when you let a woman captain," he said.

"You should be respectful," Amber said with a smirk. "Maybe the judge will take your respect into account before he hangs you."

Sahr spat at her feet. "You ought to do it yourself. For once, actually kill someone, instead of fating them to die."

Amber resisted the urge to hit Sahr, or to pull the pepper-box pistol tucked in her belt and shoot him.

Once Amber had the cutter on a solid heading, she tied off the wheel and walked around the ship, dropping and raising sails and tightening ropes. When that was done, she was hungry. She asked Sahr where he kept the food.

"There's hardtack in the cabin," he said. "The wood chest under my bunk."

Amber found the chest and carried it onto the deck. However, there was no hardtack inside. Instead, a handful of daguerreotypes lay there. Some showed her in the exact same shirt and pants she now wore, standing on the bow of this very cutter, with Sahr dangling from the yardarm. Other daguerreotypes showed Amber hanging from the yardarm. Amber stared at her swollen, broken neck, and the rope that had ended her life.

"Where did you get these?" she demanded, shoving a daguerreotype in Sahr's face.

"That picture will be taken when you arrive in Windspur with

me dangling from the yardarm. If you have the guts to do the deed, that is."

Amber glanced at a daguerreotype – in it, her skin was free of the names, and Sahr hung dead. She threw the picture at the mast, shattering it to dust and shards. She grabbed another daguerreotype, this one showing her spinning in the wind with a rope around the neck, and threw it at Sahr.

"Who the hell are you?" she screamed.

Sahr shrugged. "I'm a child of Windspur. And the gods have screwed us both."

As he said that, a blazing white name erupted from Sahr's skin – Amber Tolester. Her name ringed his neck, screaming in union with the letters of Sahr's name burning her own body. However, the pain didn't come from Sahr's foretold death. Instead, she gasped as she saw – in the purest of fire and heat – Sahr's life flooding into her.

My father was a sailor. When I was ten I woke one night to my father's name burning into my chest and the pain of knowing he was dying. I ran to my mother's room and told her. Begged her to save him. Instead, she slapped me for lying.

But in the morning, she learned I was right. She ripped the clothes off me and saw the names and screamed "Witch, witch" as she beat me bloody.

We left Windspur – left my friends and family – to live in London. Foggy, stenching, hateful London. All I had known was Windspur. Now all I had left was knowing when one of Windspur's sailors flared and died.

At twelve, I ran from home and hired on a ship. Became a cabin boy, a cook's assistant, worked my way to able seaman. The sailors all saw the names, but thought them good luck, not being from Windspur and knowing them as real people.

One day a Windspur sailor joined our ship. I tried to hide myself, but he recognized me, said he used to sail with my dad. For days all I could taste was the man's coming death as he fell from the main mast during a sudden wind storm. I feared what the other sailors would do when they learned what the names on my body meant.

So one night, while walking the alleys of London with my father's friend, I hit him across the head with a belaying pin. His name disappeared from my skin with the gentlest of kisses. I'd denied the sea its rightful death.

So I learned to change the fate of the men on my skin. I learned to read what the names told me, to track them down. The only difference was that when I met another Windspur sailor, I always killed him the first chance I got. Just to show the sea that there was no fate it could decree which I couldn't change. One by one the names vanished from my body. Eventually, there was only one left: Amber Tolester.

I knew right away this name wasn't right, as if the sea was playing a trick on me. A little girl of Windspur who had recently lost her parents, and was now carrying the burden of names as I once did. I felt the names on her body echoing to where the names had once been on me.

Then the pictures began appearing. Each time one of the sailors named on Amber's body died, a daguerreotype would appear on my bunk. Some showed Amber as a young woman; others myself. Some showed me dead. Others her. I knew the sea was taunting

me for defying its will, but I didn't care. I refused to be fated by anyone.

As I caressed my link to Amber, I prayed she would learn – like me – that we weren't fated to suffer this damned lot in life. That once she learned, I would no longer be alone.

But instead, Amber merely watched as the men sailed away to their deaths, never knowing the pleasures to be had in changing their fates.

So I decided to teach her.

When the story finished running through Amber's mind, she pulled the pistol and held it to Sahr's face, remembering her fear when he'd held the same pistol to her own head. His name burned red around her neck as Sahr's memories of murder polluted her with their touch.

But instead of pulling the trigger, she sat down on the deck beside Sahr. "So you think the sea has cursed us? And the daguerreotypes are a warning?"

"You have a better explanation?"

Amber glanced at one of the daguerreotype shards on the deck beside her. The silver halide which had fixed the image of Amber's body to the glass fell away before her eyes. She watched the image disintegrate for a few moments before throwing the shard overboard.

"It doesn't matter," she said, reaching into the box of daguerreotypes. "Doesn't matter if the sea did burn these names into us. Only matters what we do with them."

As Amber stood up, she glanced at the waters all around them. Sahr's name burned white hot on her body. The sea screamed for Sahr – begged Amber to throw the vile man overboard so it could have its way with him. Amber dragged the bound man to the railing and leaned him over the water. The suddenly choppy waves threw spray at them, almost as if the sea reached for Sahr.

For the first time, Sahr looked afraid. "Don't give me to it," he said. "I only wanted you to learn. To free yourself like I was freed."

Amber nodded. She grabbed one of the cutter's sets of block and tackle, threw a rope over the yardarm, and tied the rope in a noose around Sahr's neck. He thrashed and kicked, but he was still tied hand to foot and couldn't stop her.

Once everything was ready, she asked Sahr if he had anything else to say. He cursed at her, but he also smiled as she tightened the noose, as if pleased that Amber had finally learned what he'd been trying to teach her. He continued smiling as she pulled the rope through the block and tackle, the pulleys whining to the cordage, his smile never ending even after he hung limp from the yardarm, spinning right then left as the wind howled in anger at Sahr's death not being given to the sea.

Only with Sahr's final kick did his name vanish from her body with a perverted kiss.

When Amber neared Windspur's harbor, she dropped the cutter's sails and drifted until several ships, including the *Andercoust*, approached. Miles jumped onboard and helped steer the ship into the harbor. Miles asked several times if Amber was well, glancing from Sahr's body hanging from the yardarm to the names still visible on Amber's skin. She assured him she was fine.

Amber stood on the cutter's bow until they docked, then walked through the stunned crowd on the pier. She noticed Richard Beard near the dock with his daguerreotype camera, where he'd been taking landscapes of buildings. She started to ask if he'd taken a picture of her on the ship, but stopped, already knowing the answer.

After all, two different versions of the picture were now burned into her life.

The following Sunday, Amber and Billy married. Billy was still recovering from his injuries and could barely speak, but he croaked his "I do" and kissed Amber in a long, tight-hugging embrace. All of the sailors and townsfolk cheered, tactfully ignoring the names pulsing a deep blue through Amber's white wedding dress.

Amber continued to captain the *Andercoust*. Miles and the other sailors taught her all they knew and soon she could out sail the best of them. She sailed the *Andercoust* in storms which drove lesser captains to port, but none of her crew were ever injured or killed. Sailors spoke of her uncanny knack of stopping accidents before they happened; of arriving in time to save drowning sailors from other ships. Soon she was known as the luckiest captain in the fleet and every sailor begged to join her crew.

Occasionally people who weren't from Windspur would board the *Andercoust* and ask Amber about the rumors. Of the names which still circled her body. Whether those named men were still fated to die at sea.

Amber would shake her head and say she hoped not. If the visitors persisted, Amber would point to a silver-framed daguerreotype hanging on her cabin's wall. She'd ask if they noticed anything strange about the picture. The visitors would stare at the image of Amber on the ship. Her body free of the names; Sahr hanging from the yardarm. While the missing names always puzzled visitors, if that was all they noticed Amber simply nodded and said that was indeed the truth.

But sometimes a perceptive visitor would see a picture of Amber hanging from the mast, her body still covered in the names, her neck bent at an impossibly strange angle, and Sahr alive and laughing as he piloted the cutter.

The startled visitor would ask how this was possible. Was this some trick of the sea – angry because it had been denied Sahr's death?

Amber always laughed at such questions, but if the visitor pressed for an answer she'd point seaward and say the answers lay out there. All the visitor had to do was let the sea add his or her name to Amber's skin.

"Perhaps we can seek the answers together," she'd whisper as the visitor stared in fear at the names swirling her skin.

So far, no one has accepted her offer.

Jason Sanford seems to be publishing quite a few stories in *Interzone* these days, which makes him very happy. His website is www.jasonsanford.com. 'Into the Depths of Illuminated Seas' was originally published in a very different form in a small press zine edited by Pete S. Allen. Jason would like to thank Pete for publishing that version – he prevented the author from doing the incredibly stupid thing of removing all daguerreotypes from the tale – and to thank the *Interzone* editors for taking a chance on this reworking of the story.





HIBAKUSHA

TYLER KEEVIL

ILLUSTRATED BY MARK PEXTON

They make us wait, as usual. Beneath these flickering lights, upon a jaundiced lino floor, in the foyer of what must have been a school at one time, they make us wait. Standing for this long aggravates the pain in my shins, my joints, my spine. Like tiny slivers in my bones. To take my mind off it, I play that old kid's game: think of something else. I think of you. I think of getting caught out in that thunderstorm near Pompeii – the way you laughed and spun on the spot as rain slapped down on your sunburned face, your bare shoulders. I think of that night in Whistler, overflowing with alcohol, when you took issue for some imagined slight and tried to punch me. And I think of your studio, of the way you held your charcoal, moving it across the canvas like an orchestra conductor. Vigorous and elegant.

Time passes. The line moves forward.

At the front three weary officials stand behind a counter, dressed in the crisp grey uniforms of the new government. They question people, scan ID cards, clear us for volunteer service. Or that's the way it's supposed to go. When my turn comes, and my card gets swiped, the young man's machine makes a little beep of protest.

The man frowns, tries again. Beep.

"You've been to the zone over a dozen times already. Do you know –"

"I know."

He studies my ID, checks it against my face. Suspicious. As if I might be some kind of infiltrator trying to slip into the zone, or a Hib intent on returning home. In a way, it's not far from the truth. I doubt my outfit – baggy jeans, hoody, baseball cap – does me any favours. I wait for him to come to the inevitable conclusion.

"You'll need a referral," he says.

"I know."

Two soldiers lead me down a corridor to the office where they question referrals, and lock me inside. I take a seat in the wooden chair, across from a small desk with a computer monitor and keyboard on it. A bare bulb dangles overhead. The windows are closed, the curtains drawn. Behind the flowery odour of air freshener the room smells stale, musty. I've been here before; the tomb-like atmosphere is almost comforting.

Five minutes later the doctor arrives – a thin woman with masculine features. Square jaw. Bony cheeks. Hair bristling up like a wire brush. Dressed in a wrinkled white smock.

"Hello there," she says.

I smile, being careful not to show my gums, which have a tendency to bleed. "How are you, doctor?"

"I'm fine." She checks the name on my ID card as she takes it from me. "I'm fine, Mr Kellman. Thank you."

She swipes the magnetic strip down the side of her monitor – the mechanical motion reminding me somehow of a clerk at the supermarket. I see the reflection of the screen in her glasses: columns, stats, a headshot photo. My life in digital. Then her eyes widen slightly.

"Do you fancy yourself a martyr, Mr Kellman?"

I smile again. "Just trying to do my bit, like a good colonial."

"Six scouting sessions, three clean-up, and five more salvage. You've done a lot more than your bit." She taps her nail on the desk. It goes tick, tick, tick, like a clock or a bomb counting down. "That's four times the recommended volunteer service hours, and more than twice the limit set by health and safety regs."

"I've already signed the forms," I say, "absolving your government of any responsibility."

"So you've satisfied them. That doesn't mean you've satisfied me." She tilts her head, looks at me over her glasses. "How are you feeling, Mr Kellman?"

I know I can't fool her. Even in the bulky clothes and ballcap, I look frail and anaemic. A half-man. A scarecrow. "I've been better," I admit.

"No hair loss? No weakness? No blood in your stool?"

I clasp my hands on the desk in front of me, lower my eyes.

"Even taking precautions," she says, "an average volunteer absorbs at least a few rems per session. Continued exposure increases the risk of latent effects: cancer, sterility, genetic damage –"

"I know all this, doctor." I pause, tell myself to keep calm. "I took a healthy dose of three hundred rems during the first wave of fallout. I've been living with the sickness for months. I figure a little more exposure isn't going to hurt me."

Pin-drop silence. A frown.

Then: "It's not going to help either."

I nod, unphased. She checks my file on her monitor.

"You didn't receive that much exposure living in Wales. Were you visiting here at the time of the blast?"

"No." I don't want to talk about this, but I have to give her something. "I tried to get to ground zero in the days following. I've been trying ever since." I gesture at her computer. "See for yourself. Does that thing show you where I've volunteered so far?"

She clicks her mouse once, twice. On-screen, a map of the city materializes, complete with little red dots marking my progress – all in a row like a line of harvester ants. The significance of that is not lost on her.

"You've been working your way towards..."

"This," I say. "It's all been leading up to this. Afterwards, I'm finished."

A pause. Then her fingers begin moving over the keyboard. Even before she says anything I know she's cleared me. Not that it would have made any difference.

I would have found a way.

This changing room reminds me of gym class. The faint linger of body odour. Cracked tiles and yellowing grout. A row of battered grey lockers. Various groups, clustered together, commenting and joking with each other. Men and women change separately; each volunteer is issued with what they call 'inner protection'. As far as I can tell, it's simply a set of long underwear. I take mine to the far end, around the corner. Here there is a little alcove, with a toilet cubicle and sink, where I can change without being stared at.

The only problem is the mirror.

You would not recognize me, now. I do not recognize myself. As I struggle out of my jeans and hoody, I find it impossible not to look at my naked reflection. I have been losing weight for months, and my skeleton seems to be pressing through my skin. Ribs and hips. Collar bones and pelvis. Not an ounce of fat on me. Not much muscle, either. I shiver as I step into my underwear, zip it up, and grin at myself. I still have my lips. You always liked my lips. But my teeth have yellowed, my gums receded. And my hair has grown thin and limp as an old man's.

Apparently it will get worse before it gets better. If it gets better.

To think that I used to worry about going bald.

Footsteps, and then somebody is beside me. A tall, muscular Asian. His underwear is undone to the waist; there are letters tattooed across his chest. In Arabic, maybe? Or Farsi? He has a thick beard and an electric razor in his hand. We blink at each other, surprised. Then I step aside. I go into the toilet cubicle and sit, listening to the buzz of his shaver. When I come out, his beard has been reduced to stubble, and there is a pile of black hair in the sink. I don't know whether it's a symbolic gesture, or a practical one, and I don't really care.

"Can I borrow that?" I ask.

He offers it to me. I run it over my head once, twice. Feel the vibrations in my head, the guide firm and cool against my scalp. What remains of my hair falls lightly away, like dandelion fluff. As I give it back, the Asian holds up a hand. Wait. He takes the shaver and stands behind me. I feel it buzz across the back of my head, the nape of my neck.

"You missed some," he explains.

The stares begin in the outer changing room.

This is where the men and women converge, where everybody gathers to get into their 'outer protection'. On my first shift, I naively expected some kind of radiation suit, complete with headgear and visor, but the reality is much more mundane. In the centre of the room stands a rack of jumpsuits that resemble white painter's coveralls more than anything else. That, along with yellow hardhats and some flimsy dust masks, are all the protection we need. Apparently. Whether that's the truth, or just what they're telling us, is anybody's guess.

A pair of officials oversee the fittings; they measure people up, hand out clothing, offer instructions and advice. I already know the drill and select my own suit from the rack. A young man lets out a startled "Whoah" as I pass, and is quickly shushed by his girlfriend. Ignoring them, I begin to pull on my suit. Tottering for balance. Twenty-eight going on eighty-two. I can hear the pair of them whispering, arguing about something as they pretend not to stare at me. Eventually he musters up the courage to approach me.

"Hey mate," he says, then nervously licks his lips. Up close, I see he's only a few years younger than me. Blond hair. Greenish eyes. Strong and healthy. My doppelganger of long ago. He's careful not to stand too close – as if I might be contagious. "Sorry to be rude and all. But, have you volunteered before? Is that what messed you up?"

My feeble attempt at laughter comes out as a wheeze, startling him. "I've done it before, but you don't have to worry about looking like this." I glance past him to his girlfriend, who quickly lowers her eyes. This is probably something that you and I would have done – volunteering together like good little Samaritans. "The ash is what's dangerous – full of Strontium and Caesium. Don't get it near your nose or mouth, or on your skin. And be careful taking your suit off afterwards. But even if you went in stark naked you wouldn't develop acute symptoms like this. Not now. I got fucked by the initial fallout." I grin at him. "Hell – if you believe the Hibs there's hardly any background radiation at all anymore."

He nods, relieved. "Oh. Okay. Cheers, mate."

He scuttles back to his girlfriend, leaving me to my seclusion. I finish zipping up, reach for a dust mask, a hardhat.

The dressing room seems very quiet now.

I do not find much funny these days, but I find this funny – and I think you would, too. Our armoured bus is packed with sweaty, nervous people. Half of them are squeezed shoulder to shoulder, barely able to breathe, but there's a free seat on either side of the Asian. Nobody wants to sit by him – as if he could have a nuke hidden underneath his protective suit. As if he might have returned to finish the job. As if any more damage could be done to this city.

As if.

We totter and sway like cattle as the bus rumbles over potholes and debris. The vibrations send spikes of pain up my spine, and set my skull ringing. I don't have the patience or stamina to stand; I squeeze over and slump into one of the spare seats next to him, near the front. Travelling in convoy is safer, so there are vehicles both ahead of and behind us. I figure we're about three miles from the epicentre, trundling east on the A3212, with the cloudy Thames on our right, and Ranelagh Gardens to the left. The hedges are scorched and leafless, the sloping lawns a monotonous brown. Unmoved, I watch the deadened landscape scroll by beneath a sky the colour of curdled cream.

The Asian shifts in his seat, angles his head towards me.

He asks, "You think that's all from the blast, or the fallout?"

Good question, but not one I can answer. I shrug instead.

Across from us, a burly brummie is talking to his buddy – in a way that is meant to draw attention to himself. I catch the terms 'air burst' and 'surface burst', and realize he is explaining why the local fallout was much worse here than in Hiroshima.

"Them Yanks detonated Little Boy half a mile up," he says. "It burned clean. But surface bursts burn dirty, yeah? Kicks up a cloud, and all that radioactive shite fuses with them particles, then comes raining back down. That's why we got so fucked, like."

His friend nods along, lapping it up. For a layman's explanation, it's pretty accurate. While those nearby listen in, he goes on to describe the most impressive part of the attack: how they managed to combine a suitcase nuke with a dirty bomb, destroying half the city and making the rest uninhabitable – chock full of radioactive nuclei that will remain hazardous for at least thirty years. Or so they say. Nobody really knows what to believe these days.

At the front, the bus driver's radio crackles once and spits static. Then a voice comes on. It's barely audible. Nobody else bothers to listen, but I do. There is an 'obstruction' near Westminster, and another convoy has run into some 'problems'. That's doublespeak for a roadblock, and an organized attack. The Resident People's Army, probably – or one of the other Hib groups. The bus driver reaches for his mouthpiece, thumbs the button on the side.

"Roger that. What do you suggest, over?"

"Suggest taking alternate route, via Victoria Station. Over."

I look at the Asian. His face tells me that he, too, has overheard. "Hibs?" he says.

I grunt. Just because half the city was deemed uninhabitable didn't stop people from wanting to live in it. The compulsory government evacuation was both chaotic and heavy-handed.

Uncooperative residents got rounded up by force. There were riots, and more than a few deaths. Nobody really knows how many stayed behind, clinging to their old lives. But thanks to the government's ongoing efforts to clear them out, not all of them are friendly.

We're coming into the city proper, now. On my first session, I envisioned the entire landscape as a blackened crater, a scorched and unrecognizable wasteland. Buildings flattened for miles around. Britain's version of Hiroshima. But most of the buildings in Japan were timber-frame structures. Those that didn't get blown down by the bomb were incinerated in the ensuing fireball. Brick and stone is more durable, less flammable. Here, outside the half mile radius of ground zero, the architecture has held up surprisingly well.

Not that it's exactly untouched.

In the cracked façades lining Regent Street, every single windowpane is empty – the glass shattered by the initial shockwave. A carpet of soot and ash coats the sidewalks, the gutters. Some of the buildings have burned, leaving framework like fried pieces of Meccano. It almost looks like a war zone, but even in a war zone there would be signs of life. It is more like entering the ruin of an ancient civilization. Fossilized in cinder. Pavement cracked and buckling. Lamp posts sagging like melted candles. Slag heaps of cars. An unreality.

Then, rounding a corner, we are confronted with the truth. The brummie gasps. I don't know what he's seen. The hollow, burnt face of Big Ben? Nelson's melted statue, rising like a swamp-creature from the bronze ooze of its base? The broken columns of the National Gallery? Maybe all of those. The woman across from me is moved to tears, but I can't bring myself to feel anything. When it came to London, I always took my cue from you – and you never liked this city much. You studied here out of necessity, but preferred painting the lonely hilltops and desolate seashores of Wales. I think you would appreciate it more, now. Part of me does. I want to explore it with you, wander around these ruins like we did in Pompeii. It was spring and overcast; there were hardly any other tourists. We owned that place, ruled it as king and queen.

Two of the buses turn off here, to different destinations. We, the last, head further towards the epicentre. The brummie clears his throat, nudges his friend. "Musta took bloody ages to clear this route."

"Aye. Weeks."

I nod to myself. Three, actually. I did six shifts in that time. Working my way towards this. Towards you.

I catch a glimpse of the wrought iron-fence, mangled by heat and the concussion blast. Then the south courtyard is coming into view, and the museum itself. A blackened fortress. Sturdy and sprawling. Looking all the more impressive for the damage sustained by nearby buildings. Here, about two miles from ground zero, the general destruction is more apparent: roofs caved-in, walls collapsed, entire structures reduced to rubble. Our bus lurches to a halt in front of the south gate, on Great Russell Street, next to the remains of a Starbucks and a derelict pub. The metal plaque above the door still reads SELLING REAL ALES SINCE 1868.

Our team leader – a tall, spindly woman with a nasal voice – stands up at the front, and tells us to check our dust masks before getting off the bus. Next we file out one by one, like space-men stepping onto an alien planet. The driver opens the luggage compartment, hands out flashlights, salvage sacks, and item tags. Last comes the escort charged with our protection: a full squad of soldiers in grey camouflage. They shepherd us across the courtyard, then instruct us to wait on the steps while they secure the area. Most of the newbies huddle together, glancing at the surrounding terrain as if every object might hide swarms of Hibs intent on taking hostages. Apparently they're using people as bargaining chips now, to push for their right to abode. I sit with my back against one of the massive columns lining the façade – the base as wide around as the Redwoods you and I visited in California. Each breath pushes my dust mask out, and in, and out – like a pulsing gill.

As soon as we're given the all clear, the team leader divides us into groups. I'm put with the brummies and my Asian friend – who turns out to be our section guide. That figures. He's got the jaded look of somebody who's done this before.

"I'm Riaz," he tells us. "The one you listen to. The one with the radio." He holds it up in demonstration. "The main thing is to stick together. Don't wander off. That's for your own safety. We'll be working in rooms 68 and 70..."

This is all routine. Normally I wouldn't pay attention – just follow orders and accept my penance. But today's different. I listen carefully, not only to Riaz but to the other section guides, making a mental note regarding their locations. For the most part, it seems like our efforts will be concentrated on level 3, in rooms overlooking the Great Court. It's not the best-case scenario, but it could be worse. The trick will be in trying to slip away unnoticed.

"Bring your group back here in four hours," our team leader tells Riaz and the other guides, just before we disperse. "If anything comes up, raise me on the radio."

Aside from a guide, each section is assigned a squaddie. Ours is a weary youth who looks like he's nursing a modest hangover. He brings up the rear, yawning and cradling his assault rifle as we mount the wide stone steps. The front doors were destroyed, of course. A clean-up crew has already cleared a path for us, removing the frame and other obstructions. Inside, people turn on their flashlights. Pale circles flit like sprites across the walls, revealing the strangeness of scorched stone. A fine carpet of grey ash covers the marble floor, the welcome desk, the carved Roman busts that stand sentry in the four corners of the foyer. It reminds me of dirty snow back home. Winter has fallen on the British empire.

"Just a minute," Riaz tells us.

We wait while he gets out his map, studies it by flashlight.

"Room 68 is up here," I say, pointing to the south stairs.

He looks at me, curious, then nods – and I immediately regret drawing attention to myself. I keep my head down as we plod up the staircase, our footsteps muffled by ash.

Riaz falls in step beside me.

"You know your way around the place," he says.

I grunt. Noncommittal. The last thing I need right now is a friend.

At the top of the stairs we can see again, thanks to a series of collapsed skylights. The other volunteer groups continue further on, but the rooms we've been assigned are near the landing, which is lucky. At one time they contained displays on Greek and Roman life. Now it's hard to tell what they contain. Shattered glass. Rubble. The remnants of artefacts. I spot a bronze spear tip poking out from amidst the ash.

While the squaddie takes up position near the door, Riaz gathers us in a huddle, briefs us on our task. "We're here to salvage what we can," he says, in a well-rehearsed and rational tone. "Let's make sure we don't do more damage in the process. If you find anything of value, tag and bag it. Some items will be too heavy, delicate, or unwieldy. Mark those on your maps for expert removal. If you're unsure about anything, just ask me."

In reality, most of the delicate material has been destroyed – either by the heat or the concussion blast that followed. Parchment and tapestries simply vaporised. Pottery and ceramics didn't fare much better. The first display case I examine – shattered like all the others – has a nameplate that reads: GRECIAN URN. I spend a quarter of an hour sorting through ash and soot, picking out pottery fragments, which I dutifully bag, label, and place in my sack. It's simple, mindless work, which gives me plenty of time to plan my route. The east wing is out – apparently it's partially collapsed – and the Great Court is too exposed. That leaves the west stairs. I could walk directly to them from here, if the intervening rooms weren't filled with volunteers. As things stand, I'll have to try the lower levels.

Pretending to scour the floor for remnant shards, I creep towards the edge of the room, then glance around. Right now Riaz is in the next gallery, examining a brass shield with the brummies – probably trying to decide if it can be removed, or if it should be noted as a 'heavy object' and left for later pick-up. Our squaddie is standing with his back to us, watching the entrance. Nobody seems to be paying me any attention. Still maintaining my charade of industrious worker, I casually wander through the archway into the adjacent corridor, then cut to the right and hurry back the way we came.

By the time I reach the ground floor my breathing is ragged, and my skeleton legs are rattling with fatigue – I don't have the strength to rush around like this. Through the front entrance, I can see the ashen courtyard and bus in the distance, guarded by a pair of soldiers. I skirt the doorway, moving past the cloakroom and through what was once a souvenir shop of some kind, into the lower west wing.

The rooms here are longer and narrower than the ones in which we're working. The marble floors are similarly dusted with soot, but there are no ceramics, no pieces of pottery to puzzle over. Instead there are various sarcophagi, up-ended and overturned. Whatever mummies once inhabited them were incinerated, but some of the cases are still intact, albeit seared, cracked, blistered. Empty shells. Human husks. On most the unique Egyptian designs are still visible: folded arms, abstract facial features, a horseshoe of sculpted hair.

Then I stop, because I've heard something. The crunch of glass. Not loud, but distinctive. I press myself flat in the dust, half-shielded by the remains of a display case, and strain to hear. There. Again. From the next room. Risking a glance, I see movement in the shadows. Two figures, spread about five feet

apart, prowl past in a half-crouch. They're armed, but they're not our soldiers. One seems to gesture – making a hand signal of some sort – and then they're gone, heading in the direction of the west stairs.

Fuck.

I count to thirty, still listening, before I stand up and retrace my route. The west stairs, obviously, are out. That leaves the north wing. My last chance. Yet as I come back into the foyer, I hesitate. The others should be warned. I don't have the energy to climb to the third floor, but I do my best – slogging my way up the first flight, feeling the burn in my thighs and calves. My dust mask is damp with sweat, making it harder to breathe.

Head down, I nearly run straight into Riaz on the first landing.

"Find anything interesting?" he asks, his voice hard.

"I'm not..." I pause, trying to catch my breath. "I'm not stealing shit, man. But I just saw two Hibs. You'll have to raise the others on the radio – start clearing people out."

He takes a moment to digest my babble.

"They might be harmless."

"Not these ones. They were armed."

"The People's Army?"

"Could be."

I turn to go, and he reaches out to stop me.

"I haven't finished what I came here to do," I tell him. Then I shrug his hand away, start back downstairs. As I near the bottom the murmur of his voice floats down to me: "This is Riaz. I've had a report of a possible Hib sighting on the ground floor..."

In ruins, the Great Court is even more awe-inspiring than when I used to visit you here. It's as wide and long as a football pitch, with the sturdy cylinder of the reading room planted in the middle. Inscribed around the top is a dedication to Queen Elizabeth II. It makes me think of Shelley's *Ozymandias*. This stone was built to last, but nothing besides remains – including the overhead canopy. Glass shards – some of them melted into beads – litter the marble floor, along with pieces of concrete and twisted steel framework. It means the ground is exposed. Exposed to the sky, to the elements, and also to anybody watching from the upper floors of the museum – all of which overlook the Great Court. I can't see movement in the windows but that doesn't mean much. It's too dark to see anything in the windows.

There's two routes to the north wing – one across the open floor, and another via the spiral staircase that winds up and around the reading room. Both routes are risky, but the stairs, at least, are shielded by a waist-high concrete parapet that provides some cover. All I have to do is cross the intervening space, past a tourist information desk on the right, and the massive stone statue of a lion on the left. A chunk of its face has fallen away, giving it a sphinx-like appearance – acting as sentry to this stage of my journey.

I start walking, forcing myself not to run, counting the paces in my head. It takes me twenty-three steps. At the base of the stairs, I drop to the floor behind the parapet. Then I begin to crawl up the spiral staircase, picking my way over bits of glass, coming to you as a supplicant. On my knees. Penitent. I feel the jab of something sharp in my right palm. I tell myself to ignore the pain. I tell myself, too, to ignore the thought of all the people

who were here that day. This is their ash beneath me. Further out from ground zero, rescue crews found scorched and withered bodies, laid out like charred fish on a grill, which they buried in mass graves all over the city. But here there was nothing but soot and incineration. I can taste them through my mask, feel them soft beneath my knees. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

Halfway to the top, I take a break on the platform next to the reading room. There is a gash in my right glove, and a shard of glass in my palm. I pull it out. The wound isn't deep, but it bleeds. The sight of it surprises me, as if I half-expected to be as lifeless as my surroundings. Before the sweat cools beneath my suit, I start climbing again, leaving little spots of red, little signs of vitality, on each step. Above and behind the reading room, at the top of the stairs, I pass what remains of the museum café, with its rusted chairs, burnt bar top, and collapsed marquee. From here, a small footbridge should connect the landing with the north wing. Instead, as I crawl closer, all I see is a five-metre chasm. One steel railing remains, but the rest of the bridge lies in a twisted mess two storeys below, on the floor of the Great Court. I sit and stare at the empty space for a long time. Thinking. The railing doesn't look strong enough to support me, even if I had the upper body strength to pull myself along it.

I stand up with a grunt, shuffle over to the ruined café. The marquee was set up like a big top tent, with a steel centre pole supporting wires that extended to the awnings. The fabric has been incinerated, of course, but the pole might serve as a makeshift bridge. Torn loose from its concrete base, it smashed across a row of tables, and now lies there like a felled sapling. Maybe eight inches in diameter. I clear away the surrounding debris, panting from the effort, then take up position at one end of the pole and grip it with both hands. I tug. It doesn't budge, so I try pushing instead, leaning all my weight against it, and manage to shift it a few inches. I alternate between pushing and pulling, trying to free it up. It doesn't look that heavy, but it's solid – and I'm too feeble to make a difference. I throw myself against it, slipping on ash-coated marble, vigorous and ineffectual as an old lover.

Eventually I collapse, sucking air through my damp mask, dizzy from the effort.

"Of all the things," somebody says, "I expected you to be doing, this wasn't one of them."

I look back. Riaz is standing at the top of the stairs.

"I relayed your message. I hope you were right about those Hibs. They're clearing everybody out. I volunteered to come after you, bring you back."

In answer, I shake my head, gesture helplessly at the collapsed walkway. There is a moment of decision. He's big enough to drag me back by force, if necessary. I don't doubt that. And I'm too exhausted to beg or plead with him. Just wait him out. Hoping.

"Christ," he says. "Come on, then."

Taking up position at the other end of the centre pole, he lifts it free. I can't believe how easily it comes loose, how light it looks in his hands. With him carrying and me vaguely helping, we haul it towards the edge of the landing. It's too unwieldy to push across the gap; we have to stand it upright and then tip it over, lowering it like a drawbridge.

When it's down, Riaz wedges it into place with a chunk of football-sized concrete, then tests it with his foot. Solid. He

says, "Might have been easier to use the north stairs."

I wheeze laughter. "I didn't know the bridge had collapsed. But, yeah. Probably."

From far off, a series of popping echoes reverberate through the Great Court. We stare at each other, taking a moment to understand the significance. Gunshots. A second later the radio crackles at his waist and a voice begins to bleat: "Riaz? Riaz?"

He reaches for it, presses the button on the side. "This is Riaz."

"We've come under attack – we have to get out of here!" It's the nasal voice of our team leader, rapid with panic. "The last group is returning. Have you found him? You have to...you have to..." There's shouting, and she seems to get herself together. "They're telling me that we're leaving in five minutes. With or without you. Do you hear me? Riaz?"

"Yes. I'm coming right now."

He turns off the radio, looks at me, questioning. I shake my head. For a second it looks like he might argue. Then he extends his hand, offering me the radio.

"Good luck," he says.

And he's gone.

Our makeshift bridge is strong and stable. The pole easily supports me, and I keep my balance by clutching at what remains of the rail, inching my way along. Two Doric columns mark the opposite landing. The room beyond is dim, with less natural light, but I can't risk using my flashlight. Among the shadows I pick out the remains of a Mesopotamian display: more ceramic and pottery shards, the remnants of a frieze, some kind of ornamental headdress. The silence is broken by the occasional snap of distant gunfire as I creep through the rubble, passing into the next room and across the landing at the top of the north stairs.

Then I see a shadow move. Near the stairwell. And another – in the doorway opposite. I stop dead, but it's too late. I can hear more of them behind me. Closing in.

I turn on my flashlight.

The beam picks out ghoulish faces. Gaunt. Pale. Feral. Most of them are suffering from the sickness. Dark mirrors of myself, clad in dirty jeans and sweatshirts, wielding a motley selection of weapons – clubs and cricket bats and the occasional firearm, probably scavenged from someplace in the zone. These are them. These are the Hibs. Britain's home-grown version of the Japanese Hibakusha. Most people just think it means survivors – those that were here during the detonation and ensuing fall-out, and who refused to leave. But the literal translation is explosion-affected people.

I wonder if I can impress them with that knowledge.

"Hello, hello," one of them says – a squat woman with a broken nose.

"I've got no beef with you," I say, holding up my hands. "I just –"

"Shut up."

She hits me with her club. The impact sends me reeling, and they descend on me. For several seconds all I can see are shadowy faces, sneering and snarling. I feel the blows rocking me, and the knowledge that this might be the end – that they really intend to keep me from reaching you, after all this time – is worse than any physical pain. I fight back, feebly, with all my strength. My ears are ringing from that first blow so I don't even

realize I'm screaming at first. No – not screaming. Keening. A high-pitched wail that echoes off the walls, like a wild animal's, vicious and rabid. As desperate as them. More desperate.

Then the whirlwind stops, and they're all looking down at me. In the fray, I've lost my hardhat and my mask. With my protection stripped away, they can see me for the first time. My bloody, gap-toothed grimace. My emaciated features. My hairless head.

In this place, like knows like.

I can barely breathe, but I manage to gasp, "Kill me if you want. Or take me hostage. Hell – I'll fucking join your campaign. Just let me past, first. That's all I came here for."

The one that hit me asks, "What are you on about?"

I point a trembling finger behind them, towards the entrance to the drawing room.

"There's nothing bloody left up there," she says.

"Don't you think I know that?"

The pack looks at their leader uncertainly, waiting for her judgement.

"Fuck it. You." She taps one of her men. "Go with him. Then take him back to base. We'll figure out what to do with him later. The rest of you, on me."

And that's it. They scuttle away into the half-dark like a pack of rats, the glass crackling beneath their feet. The one left behind hauls me upright with surprising gentleness. I almost expect him to dust me off, pat me on the back. Instead he trails behind as I mount the steps, shadows me as I pass through the remains of the revolving door that leads to the drawing room. There are no windows here; direct sunlight would have damaged the delicate parchment and paper that they had on display. I turn on my torch to see. Where once there were the soft etchings of Rembrandt, the messy lines of Matisse, the sculpted sketches of Michelangelo, now there are empty display cases set into the walls. My bench is still there, blackened by heat. I often sat on it as I waited for you, staring at Da Vinci's massive Madonna and child. You taught me about composition, and symmetry, about the triangle connecting mother, baby, and St Anne. I studied it for so long I can almost see it still, in negative, against the soot-soaked space that remains.

The drawing hung on a partitioned wall; behind it is the set of double doors that separates this room from the archives. I stare at it for some time, then turn to my escort.

"It's an enclosed room," I say. "I'd like to go in alone."

He shrugs, checks his watch – both uninterested and unmoved. "You've got four minutes."

The set of wooden doors is blasted and warped, but by putting my shoulder into the one on the left I manage to force it open – just wide enough to slip through. Inside is the antechamber, a small space with a desk where the curator sat. I do not think she liked me, much. She always gave me a forced smile as she made me wash my hands, pull on latex gloves. Perhaps she could sense I was indifferent to her treasures. They didn't mean the same thing to me as they did to the students and artists; I was only ever here to see you.

On the other side of the chamber, only a few steps away, another door marks the final gateway. It is solid, and metal, and has held up better to the blast. It was unlocked at the time of detonation, and I'm betting that it's unlocked now. I put my palm to the handle.

And ease it open.

The light startles me – the flare blossoming, like the flash you must have seen that day. It comes full through paneless windows, washes my vision out white. I blink and squint. I'd forgotten about the windows, but now I remember you explaining how they'd been treated to keep out harmful UV rays – adopting that shy, embarrassed tone you always used when discussing your work and expertise. As my eyes adjust, shapes materialize out of the haze: the spindly frames of burnt bookshelves, like used matchsticks arranged in strange geometric patterns; metal desks, bowed with pressure; gobs of molten glass, dripping from the window sills like something in a Dali painting. And dust, of course. Everywhere, dust.

I shut the door, wedge a steel chair beneath the handle. It won't do much, but it affords us some privacy. I move into the centre of the room, kicking up clouds at each step. The ash swirls around me, caught in the sunlight. There's an entire universe in here, each particle a planet. The stuff of stars. What we all came from, where we're all going. Treading carefully, as if on ice, I make my way to the desk in the far corner of the room. I touch the heat-buckled chair. This is where you would have been sitting. You liked to sketch near the window, enjoyed looking down at the people passing in the courtyard below.

"I'm here, *cariad*," I say, using the only Welsh you taught me. "I'm here, my love."

I don't know what I expected to find. A Hiroshima shadow? Some trace of you? Maybe an engagement ring, or your last drawings? But there's nothing. Just dust. I run my palm across your desk, across your chair. It comes away black. I touch it to my face, leave streaks of war-paint there. Is this it? Is this you? Is this what I've come looking for?

A staccato burst of gunfire startles me, followed by the resurgent sounds of violence. It's much louder here, near the windows. As if in answer, the radio crackles at my waist.

"Kellman?" somebody says. "This is Riaz. Where are you?"

I don't answer immediately, but eventually I pick it up. "Still inside."

"They're attacking the bus. As soon as the last volunteers are onboard, we're going."

I stand there, holding the radio, gazing absently around the empty room.

"You hear me?" he says.

"I hear you."

Crossing to the window, I gaze out. The drawing room overlooks Montague Place; to the left, just visible on the corner, is a fire exit and stairs. I might be able to reach it via the window ledge. Or I could stay here with you. I'm still considering my options when I hear the door handle turn, followed by a pounding as my minder realizes I've locked him out.

"I guess I'm coming," I say into the radio.

Leaving it on the desk, I crawl through the empty window frame. The ledge is about six inches wide. When I stand up, the toes of my boots hang over the edge. I shuffle along, back pressed against the wall, staring down at the thirty foot drop to the courtyard below. I imagine falling, smashing my bones on the rubble-strewn cement. I don't feel fear at the thought. I don't feel anything.

Then somebody's shouting at me. When I reach the fire escape, I look back. My minder is leaning out the window, training his pistol on me. We stare at each other across the gap, but the gun is an impotent threat. He can kill me if he wants, and keep me here with you. I start shambling down the metal stairs, leaning on the rail for support. I fall twice. Each time, I'm slower to get up. As a moving target I'm not exactly nimble, but the expected bullet never comes. The next time I look up, from the courtyard, the window is empty.

I don't know if he's gone to cut me off, or help his friends, and I don't waste time trying to figure it out. Gasping and choking, covered in dust and ash, I stagger across the courtyard, circling the museum towards the main entrance on Russell Street. At the corner, I drop to a knee and peer around – getting my first glimpse of the skirmish going on out front.

Our guards have retreated to the bus, forming a protective half-circle around it. Several of them are crouched by the front end for cover. In the seats, behind windows spiderwebbed with cracks, I can see the hunched forms of terrified volunteers, heads bowed as if in preparation for a plane crash. The last stragglers are still being ushered onboard.

A handful of Hibs lie sprawled across the courtyard, either dead or wounded. More have arrived to fill their ranks, taking up position behind lampposts, concrete benches, chunks of rubble – anything that's on hand. The bark of gunfire is intermittent but consistent. As I watch, a masked Hib stands up and lobs a flaming bottle at the bus. It pinwheels through the air, and comes down near the radiator grill – shattering into a pool of flames.

The only route to the bus lies straight through the centre of the firefight. I already feel like I've run a marathon. I can taste blood in my throat. My legs are just barely holding me up, and my whole head seems to be throbbing, like a giant heart planted on my shoulders. I'm in no shape to run a gauntlet like this, but it's not like I've left myself any alternatives.

I start sprinting.

I don't bother dodging or ducking – just take the most direct line. Something hurtles past my head. A rock, maybe? Then a scarecrow figure rushes towards me, face twisted into a grimace. We converge, bounce off each other. I stumble and scramble on, kicking away his clutching hands. Bullets zip by like angry bees. Dust kicks up at my feet. Shit. They're shooting at me. At first I assume it's the Hibs. Then I realize it's coming from the bus. Without my mask and hardhat, covered in grime, I must look like another crazed attacker. Impossibly, that makes me want to laugh. I raise my hands, wave them frantically in protest.

"Don't shoot!" I shout. "Don't fucking kill me! I'm one of you!"

Even as I say it, I realize that it's true. I'm one of them, the living. And for a split second, running headfirst into friendly fire, and away from the place that is your tomb, I feel the sweet and desperate desire to survive.

Tyler Keevil is an award-winning author and filmmaker from Vancouver, Canada. His speculative fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Black Static*, *On Spec*, *Neo-Opsis*, *Solaris*, *Dark Tales*, and *Jupiter SF*. His first novel, *Fireball*, is due to be published in the autumn of 2010. He currently lives in mid-Wales with his wife Naomi.

IN THE HARSH GLOW OF ITS

BY MERCURIO D. RIVERA

Isprinted through narrow, zigzagging pathways inside the pine-green glacier. I could make out Rossi's black bomber jacket far behind me, appearing and disappearing with each bend. The air-pulses struck the sides of the walls, sending chunks of ice flying.

I dropped, hugged the frozen ground, and waited.

We landed at the Lassel Airstrip near Axelis Colony where I was sure my wife, Miranda, had arrived a month ago with Rossi. Joriander and Hexa hauled my bags down our seedship's ramp while I hugged my hooded fur coat tight. Neptune hovered high in the pale viridian sky. Even with the Wergen force field doming this airstrip, Triton's tenuous atmosphere still mustered a bitter breeze that stung my face like razors.

The three of us trudged across the empty tarmac toward the terminal entranceway. To our left, the towering, cathedral-like glaciers of Triton's North Pole glittered blue-green, capturing Neptune's luminescence.

"Here, Maxwell," Hexa said, removing a leathery scarf and exposing her white-scaled face to the elements. She threw it around my shoulders and pressed close to me – too close, I thought – for a few seconds longer than necessary.

Joriander followed suit, removing his temp-mitts and offering them to me.

I resisted the urge to slap the gloves to the ground. "Knock it off. I'm fine."

The Wergens hunched their shoulders at my curtness, and I felt a pang of guilt. They continued their steady gait at my side. The ground rumbled and a geyser exploded on the horizon, spewing ice-lava miles into the sky.

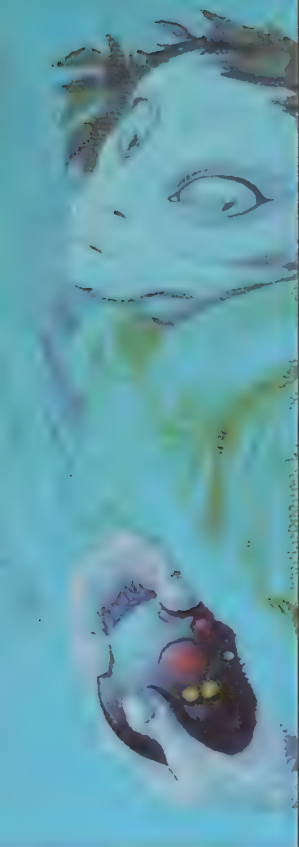
Oh, the distances you've traveled, Miranda. He's taken you so far from home. But don't worry, my love. I'm here now.

After a few paces, Hexa placed her four-fingered hand on my shoulder, letting it linger there. "I wish my people could have produced a more effective field over this area, one that could generate more comfortable temperatures for humans. I apologize."

"No need," I said, shrugging off her hand. "After all, where would we be without you?" Probably relegated to digging caves on equatorial Mars, I thought. Wergen fieldtech had opened up every planetesimal in the solar system to human colonization, the limitations of temperature, radiation, gravity and atmosphere all conquered in one fell swoop. Without their help I would never have obtained transport from Earth to Triton to track down Miranda and bring her home.

Joriander removed a jewel-encrusted sphere from his inside robe pocket and tapped several of the gemstones. In response, the terminal's circular doorway irised open and we entered a cavernous holding area. As soon as the door rumbled shut, a dozen bots, mantis-like devices the size of terriers, skittered towards us. They herded us into an enormous decontamination pen where they scanned our retinas, removed and sterilized our clothes, and ran us through a battery of tests to screen for contagious diseases.

I caught the Wergens staring at me with rapt attention, their large mooning eyes probing my body. I cupped my hands over my crotch. Despite the Wergens' notorious reticence to discuss their sexual practices, they showed no bashfulness at their own nakedness. They were squat, husky, with reptilian



INCANDESCENT BEAUTY



scales speckling their bleached-white skin, and no visible genitalia. Hexa, the female, matched my height, while Joriander, the male, stood a foot shorter. Rumor had it that their sexual organs lay hidden within their flat-topped craniums, which they kept covered at all times, even now, with a leafy headdress. I shuddered. For all of the Wergens' courtesies, I still felt an instinctive aversion toward them.

But they offered us so much. And I had to do whatever necessary to save Miranda.

One of the bots injected a tracker into my earlobe. Local officials carefully monitored all new arrivals, a practice I was counting on to find Miranda among the hundreds of thousands of Axelis's inhabitants. The bots then sprayed our naked bodies with a microfilament that produced an electrical field evident only by the faintest of blue tinges.

"This will maintain your body temperature at a more comfortable level," Joriander said. "We won't need the heavier protective clothing any more."

I turned away and donned the standard two-piece blue uniform provided to us, feeling the Wergens' eyes on my back. The bots then guided us to a raised monorail where the three of us boarded a private railcar headed to Axelis.

We sped above smooth, dark-green ice plains formed over millions of years by a slurry of water and ammonia. And as the minutes turned to hours, the topography below us shifted to a landscape of what I'd heard described as 'cantaloupe skin,' an endless expanse of circular depressions separated by deep, rounded ridges. Ahead of us, Neptune crawled across the skyline, growing smaller as it moved to the west but still filling a quarter of the sky. The Great Dark Spot, a massive storm system, stained its southern hemisphere behind half-formed rings.

"A spectacular sight, isn't it?" Hexa said, leaning toward me.

What did you think, Miranda, when you saw these alien vistas? Did you snuggle in Rossi's arms? To what extent had the neuro-mone warped your thinking?

The railcar wound around a bend between two icy mountain peaks and, all at once, Axelis came into view. The settlement sat in the thousand-mile Great Gulch, a valley of endless rows of low, neon-lit hills beneath a silver web of monorail tracks. The wisp of blue from the Wergen force field stretched from one peak to another. Below us, more than five hundred thousand colonists from Earth, Mars and Werg populated Axelis.

Joriander locked eyes with me in an intense manner that made me uncomfortable. "Did you leave it on the ship?" he asked.

I reached down and unzipped the side pocket of my bag, revealing the airpulsar. "No, I'll be needing this."

Joriander averted his eyes.

An air-pulse whooshed past me and the ground to my left exploded. Another shot rang out and I darted into a crevice in the green ice-wall.

My teeth chattered. I was headed in a dangerous direction, away from Lassel, where the Wergen force field would become more and more tenuous. After a few seconds, I stopped running. Eventually nothing would protect me from the moon's deadly natural environment. There was no trace of Rossi. No, the sensible thing for him to do would have been to forget about me. But I suppose he was no more sensible than I was when it came

to Miranda.

At that moment, he came around a bend, firing.

The slim, seven-foot administrator sported a platinum-blond crew cut and hunched over a com terminal. Her height pegged her as Mars-born. "Yes, they do reside in Axelis."

"Do you have an address?" I said.

It turned out that Miranda and Rossi had temporarily settled in the Pretori District in southern Axelis. They were on the long waiting list for the Human/Wergen expedition to Langalana, an unexplored but potentially habitable planet hundreds of light years away.

"Thank you for your help," I said.

"My pleasure to serve, sir." She bowed dramatically. "Welcome to Triton."

Joriander, Hexa and I retreated to the rotunda of the Visitors' Center. From within this hollowed-out hill, it resembled the lobby of any office building on Earth or Mars except that every human that bustled past us was accompanied by one or two Wergens.

We boarded the jam-packed public monorail to Pretori. A smaller contingent of Wergens wedged in among the Earthers and Martians, their bleached-white faces frozen in ecstasy. Joriander and Hexa also seemed dazed into paralysis by the human crowd while I felt relieved by the brief respite from their constant attentions.

The complex where Miranda and Rossi resided, like all the habitations in Axelis, consisted of a green, rocky knoll drilled with scores of catacombs and caverns. I disembarked from the tram and walked a paved path that snaked up the rocky terrain. Hexa and Joriander, eager to please, as always, lugged my two bags up the side of the hill.

Row upon row of windows pocked the entire hillside, standing out like grids on an emerald anthill. Faces stared from behind them, surveying our arrival. I searched for Miranda's visage among them, to no avail.

Making our way through crisscrossing catacombs, I asked for directions from passersby until I reached the cavern where Miranda lived. I pounded on the door. When no one answered, I lowered my shoulder into it, but the door held firm.

"Can I help you, sir?" A Martian neighbor poked his long neck out into the corridor at the sound of the commotion.

"I'm looking for the man and woman who live here."

"Who are you?"

"Miranda's husband."

"Her husband— Oh, I see." The man tilted his head and scrunched his nose in an expression I couldn't quite read.

"Do you know where they are?" I said.

"They left last week to attend basic training for the Langalanan expedition. They're due back any day."

On my adrenaline-high, I had to resist the urge to break down the door anyway. Joriander thanked him for the information and gently pressed his hand against the middle of my back, moving me away. Hexa mentioned that the ships to Langalana departed from the Cipango Planum Plateau in the western hemisphere of Triton, which is where training would take place. Our Joint Venture Agreement with the Wergens required humans to work side-by-side with them on Triton or Europa or one of the other

spaceports for at least six months to qualify for these colonization missions. The Wergens provided their tech to humanity: wormhole-generating seedships for intergalactic travel, force field devices, low-level AI bots that performed the physical labor. In return, we gave them our art, our ingenuity, and – what they desired most of all – our companionship.

A trip to distant Cipango Planum risked delaying my reunion with Miranda for weeks if she were already on her way back and I missed her, so, despite my frustration, we were left with no alternative but to settle into the closest available cavern to wait. The Wergens shared the single sleeping room while I camped out on the stone green bench in the living area, staring out a window overlooking the pathway approaching the complex. The cavern smelled musky with a trace of burnt rubber – a sure sign of recently lasered rock. Stoked on stims, which I sniffed at a steady pace, I spent two days observing every approaching individual, hoping to see Miranda's sweet face, a familiar streak of red hair, her pale, soft skin. Water geysers exploded sporadically on the horizon.

The Wergens prepared meals for me and supplied the stims. When they weren't engaging me in annoying small talk, they would sit in two chairs and study me silently, a half-smile on their flat faces.

"You're very diligent," Hexa said. "Very devoted to your mission. That's an admirable trait, Maxwell."

I twitched from the stims.

"Why did Miranda leave you?" Joriander asked.

I had already explained this to them back on Earth when I negotiated their price for using the seedship – eight months of my companionship – but they still couldn't grasp the situation. I had left out many details, of course. I told them nothing about how Rossi and I had served on the Wergen Study Group – or the 'Love Panel' as it came to be known in the academic circles we traveled. We were selected to work with a committee of fellow scientists to delve into the nature of the Wergens' obsessive infatuation with humanity. Rossi and I were specifically tasked with examining the aliens' brain chemistry, a near-impossible assignment given the aliens' taboo against revealing anything to us about their physiology. But military operatives had surreptitiously obtained Wergen skin cells and body scans, which proved invaluable to our research.

We discovered that the introduction of a strand of the aliens' single-helixed DNA into the cells of the medial temporal lobe of a human test-clone caused a new neurotransmitter to be generated in the amygdala, one that stimulated the firing of very specific postsynaptic neurons – the ones responsible for feelings of love. After synthesizing the neuromone, we were in the process of presenting our findings. That's when Rossi disappeared with the sample. And with Miranda. It never crossed my mind that he would think to *use* the neuromone, and on my wife no less. When I thought of the three years I'd worked side by side with him, the weekend swivelball games, the times I'd tried to cheer him up over watered-down beers at Helen's Pub during his rancorous divorce... How many times had Miranda and I had him over for dinner?

"She's been drugged, brainwashed," I said to them, fingering the airpulsar I now carried in the inside pocket of my jacket.

Joriander and Hexa seemed perplexed. "She doesn't under-

stand what she's doing?" Hexa said.

"Her feelings have been...warped." When they remained bewildered, I added: "I miss her. I miss her smile in the morning, the warmth of her body in our bed. I need to be with her."

This they understood. They bobbed their heads in empathy. "She's my wife."

Joriander and Hexa looked confused again. During our uncomfortable trek from Earth I had tried my best to explain the concept of marriage to them, with no success. The Wergens had trouble understanding how mere vows could connect two people. I had finally thrown my hands up and escaped to the REM-pod where I hibernated for several months only to awaken to the sight of their flat smiling faces. How long had they stood there casting their adoring eyes in my direction over those long months? My skin crawled.

"It's difficult for us to understand 'leaving' after you've been joined together in what you term marriage," Hexa said.

"It's complicated," I said.

When I stopped talking, Hexa changed subjects and asked: "What are these black fibers sprouting on your face?" She reached out to touch my cheek.

I flinched. "I haven't had a chance to shave."

They continued to gawk at me.

"Do you have to stare all the time?" I asked.

"You're just so..." Joriander struggled for the words. "Luminous. Incandescent. It's difficult not to admire your beauty."

Joriander's response didn't make me any more comfortable. The Wergens' unconditional love for us transcended gender or species. As always, I did my best to ignore them and focused my attention on Triton's horizon.

My chest ached as I sucked air.

After several hundred meters, the trail before me opened into a wide, bowl-shaped arroyo. The peaks of the glacier circled high above. Ahead, the ground broke into layered ridges that sloped downwards. I twirled around looking in all directions for any sign of Rossi.

Then I glimpsed movement. Like a charmed snake, an arm rose from below an ice steppe and Rossi fired the airpulsar. It struck a glacier wall, scattering icy splinters that rained down on me.

On the third night, I spotted her. She walked hand in hand with Rossi before he stopped to kiss her. A Wergen followed close behind them. Miranda waved goodbye to Rossi and he proceeded onward past the gates with the Wergen while she entered the residential catacombs alone.

"You're looking stressed, Maxwell," Hexa said.

"Are you well?" Joriander said.

I shoved past the Wergens and bolted out the front door, down the curving corridor.

When I arrived at the entranceway I found her by the elevators, her back to me.

"Miranda!" I grabbed her arm and spun her around. Her face blanched, her eyes widened. A long strand of red-orange hair draped across her left eye. She looked exactly as if she'd seen the ghost of the husband she'd cheated on.

"Max! How did you...?"

I kissed her cheeks, her lips, her forehead, over and over. "It's okay, I'm here, I'm here."

She pushed me away. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to bring you home."

She stepped backward.

"You've been drugged! It's a chemical, a neuromone we discovered." The words came in a flood. I explained it all to her, how the single vial of the substance had disappeared the night before she left, how Rossi must have slipped the neuromone into some food or beverage she'd consumed.

"Oh, Max," she said. "I told you to stay away."

"None of this is your fault, Miranda. There would've been no way for you to resist. You would've fallen instantly in love with the first person you saw."

"Max, I need for you to listen to me." She put her hands on my forearms as if to both steady me and keep me at a distance. "I know I'm drugged." She paused for a beat as if to let the message sink in. "Rossi confessed everything to me."

"What?" I felt as if the floor shifted under me. "I'll work on a treatment, Miranda –"

"No, you don't understand –"

"I'll find a way to counter the effects –"

"I want to stay here with Rossi."

Her words stunned me.

"I know I *should* be furious, I *should* feel victimized. But that's not how I feel! I'm an adult, I'm lucid, rational and...I'm in love with Rossi. Deeply, totally, unconditionally in love. I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life."

"You're not thinking straight."

She shook her head vigorously. "Look, the chemical simulates the processes in the brain when a person is in love, correct? In other words, if you compared my brain chemistry with that of a normal, happy newlywed there'd be no difference between the two, isn't that right?"

"Well, yes. But in your case it's been triggered by a foreign substance, a drug!"

"So what?"

"Miranda...!"

"So what? What difference does it make what the *origin* of these feelings are? The point is that they're real to me. I'm in love with Rossi."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "And what about me? What about what we had?"

A long pause followed. "I've behaved unforgivably. You have every reason to despise me for what I've done –"

"You're not at fault. Rossi is."

"No, I should've settled things with you before leaving, Max," she said. "But I was too much of a coward. Maybe someday you'll find it in your heart to forgive me for what I've done, but right now you need to forget about me and get on with your life."

"I can't do that." Not while she remained under the neuromone's spell.

"Please, don't make me hurt you any more than I already have." She turned to leave. "Rossi will be here soon. You should go."

I hoped it wouldn't come to this, but I had no choice. I lunged and grabbed her from behind. Peeling off the synth-skin covering my thumb, I pressed the dermaplast-soaked digit against the back of her ear. She struggled for just an instant before letting

out a sigh and falling back into my arms.

I cradled her as Joriander and Hexa approached.

"Maxwell! What did you do?" Joriander said.

Hexa grabbed Miranda's wrist. "Is she dead?"

"She's fine. Help me take her back to the ship. We're putting her into spacesleep for the trip back to Earth."

Joriander crossed his arms and wiggled his stubby fingers, a gesture I'd never seen before, but which I later came to associate with Wergen anxiety. Hexa mimicked him.

We walked half a block to the monorail line, passersby gaping at Miranda's limp body in my arms, and boarded a private railcar back to the Lassel Airstrip.

Joriander stood watch over Miranda's body in the ship's medroom while Hexa prepared the ship for departure. I stared out of the plexi and saw the terminal's metal door whirl open, two silhouettes emerging from the bright interior, one human, the other Wergen. Their appearance was inevitable, I supposed, given our implanted trackers.

I walked down the ramp onto the tarmac.

"What do you think you're doing, Max?" Rossi flashed an angry smile when he spoke. He looked thinner than I remembered, younger. Somehow he'd managed to find the time to maintain his tan on Triton. As he approached, he pulled an airpulsar from his bomber jacket and pointed it at me.

"Don't do this!" the Wergen accompanying him pleaded. The alien looked at me with lovesick eyes as if marveling at a delicate flower about to be plucked.

"Don't worry, Olbodoh," Rossi said to the Wergen. "I won't hurt him...unless he forces me to." He moved closer, his Wergen companion shuffling right behind him. "Olbodoh," Rossi said, "board that ship and retrieve Miranda."

"But are you sure you'll be –"

"Do it!"

The Wergen crossed his arms and wiggled his fingers while striding up the ramp, disappearing into the vessel.

"I trusted you, you son of a bitch," I said.

I thought I saw regret flash in his eyes for a microsecond. "Don't play the victim here, Max. It doesn't suit you. Miranda's happy now. You didn't deserve her," he said.

"You kidnapped my wife. Well, guess what? You're getting on this ship with us back to Earth. When you wake up in a few months it'll be to face charges. You'll be digging pits on Mars the rest of your miserable life."

"I don't think so, Max," he said. "*You're* the kidnapper."

I moved closer to him and he jerked the gun upward, pointing it at my head.

"Rossi, do you think I'm so stupid I wouldn't have a contingency plan in case you had a gun?"

"Keep your distance," he said. He pointed the airpulsar at my feet and attempted a warning shot. Nothing happened.

I laughed. "My Wergen companions set up a dampening field –"

He lunged forward and knocked me hard across the mouth with the barrel of the pulser, dropping me to my knees. The force of the blow made my bodyfield blink off and on, then disappear.

The subzero temperatures assaulted me. I reached for the gun in my own jacket, the one immune to the dampening field, and fired. The shot went wide.

At that moment the ground rumbled and a geyser exploded in the distance.

I stumbled and dropped the gun.

It slid forward and Rossi dove for it ahead of me. I realized I had no chance of wresting the gun from him before he could fire it.

I scrambled backwards, then raced along the tarmac away from the ship, in the direction of Triton's towering glaciers.

I rolled to my left and hugged the frozen soil above his line of sight, trying to control my ragged breathing.

The ground shook again and an explosion boomed. Above us, a plume of ice-slush shot into the air.

When I caught sight of him again, Rossi's distant form darted into another crevice in the far ice wall.

I leapt down the steppes, my spikes crunching in the snow. I could barely feel my feet. Mucus had frozen above my lip.

As I clambered down the final steppe, inhaling needles, I slipped and fell. My entire body slid sideways to the left and stopped just short of a crevasse two meters across that opened up into a black, bottomless pit. I crawled away from the edge and found my feet, bolting into another steep-sided passageway. Like the prior trail, sharp corners lay ahead, only this time the path forked into multiple arteries, a maze. I slowed down at each corner expecting Rossi to be lying in wait. I hit dead end after dead end, turning and veering back, looking upwards to see if I could climb out, but spotting only glassy scarps that stretched into infinity. When I made my way around a long curved bend, I saw him.

Rossi was up to his waist in an icy slush. He'd taken a misstep and found himself in quicksand-like slurry no doubt precipitated by the gushing geysers that surrounded us and filled up crevasses.

I strode towards him, careful to stay on solid footing.

"This isn't about you, Max. It's about me and Miranda." He clutched my ankle; I kicked his wrist with my other foot until he let go. I kicked him again and again, his arm, his shoulder, the side of his head, until the blue aura around him faded and his bodyfield collapsed. He let out a gasp that turned into a howl as the subzero temperatures assaulted him and he sank further into the ice slurry. This was it. The moment I had waited for, ever since I came home to an empty house and a note in Miranda's familiar scrawl that simply said 'It's over, Max. Please don't follow us.' Us. And she had expected me not to do anything?

I picked up the airpulsar, which lay on the ground several feet beyond his reach. My arms shivered uncontrollably so I grasped it with both hands, pointing it at Rossi's head.

"I love her, Max." He barely got the words out through chattering teeth.

I fingered the trigger.

"That's enough, Maxwell."

Joriander, Hexa and Olbodoh stood behind me. Scores of metal bots swarmed from behind them over the ridges of ice. One skittered over my legs and crawled onto my chest, another crawled over Rossi. The blue veneer of my bodyfield blinked back on, as did Rossi's.

"What are you doing?" I screamed. "This isn't your concern!"

"We've deactivated your weapon," Joriander said. "We can't

just stand by and allow you to kill each other. It would be blasphemous."

"Stay out of this!"

"Maxwell, we do what you ask, what your people ask, because we love you." His every word oozed with compassion. "All of you. You're all precious. You're all beautiful. It would be immoral to stand by and let you hurt yourselves this way. We want to protect you, to nurture you."

"He deserves to pay for what he's done!" I trembled, but not from the cold, and my voice broke.

"You're both suffering from frostbite. You need to be tended to."

The carapace of one of the bots opened like a blooming flower and a syringe emerged, penetrating my thigh.

I woke to the muted glow of the ceiling lights in the ship's medroom. Joriander sat by my bed, stroking my hair. I turned my head away from him. On the other side of the room, Miranda and Hexa stood next to a bare-chested Rossi who was buttoning his shirt.

I lurched off the table, but lost my footing as the room tilted. Joriander grabbed hold of me before I collapsed.

"You need to lay back down, Maxwell. The sedative the bots gave you won't lose its effect for another thirty minutes." He helped me back onto the table.

"You alien bastard," I muttered. Joriander turned away as if I'd slapped him.

Hexa and the other Wergen, Olbodoh, accompanied Miranda and Rossi to the door of the medroom.

Miranda stopped at the threshold and looked back at me. "Can I have a moment alone with him?" she asked the Wergens.

As they exited the room, Rossi placed his hand on her back and she gave him a nod, as if assuring him it would be all right. He smirked at me – a smile of triumph – and followed the Wergens.

Miranda sat on the chair next to my table, her red hair draping the side of her freckled face. She took a deep breath. "I remember when we first met, Max. I felt the same...giddiness, the same butterflies-in-my-stomach feelings that I have now for Rossi."

And, oh, how I had reciprocated those feelings. Beautiful women like Miranda had always been out of my reach and when she confessed her feelings for me it was as if I'd been shunted out of my universe onto a parallel Earth with lower gravity.

"I found it so endearing at first when you'd wake up with your hair uncombed and sit on the balcony in your underwear retrieving your work messages." She smiled sadly. "But those feelings are dead now. Gone for good."

"I can't accept that," I said. "What we shared was...deeper than dopamine coursing through our brains."

"So says the man of science." She laughed softly. "The man who studies the biology of love for a living."

"You've got it all wrong, Miranda. It's love that causes the chemical reactions in our bodies, not the other way around. I have to believe that."

She covered her mouth and shook her head.

"Don't go, Miranda. If you have second thoughts about Rossi, it'll be too late to –"

"I'm talking about *us* now, Max." She pushed her hair out of her eyes. "What happened to that electricity we used to have?"

"Every relationship settles into a...comfortable dynamic. You can't maintain that 'giddiness' forever," I said. And as I spoke these words I couldn't help but think of it in biochemical terms, the dopamine replaced slowly over the course of time with oxytocin and vasopressin, intense passion replaced with feelings of companionship and bonding. I pushed the thought away.

Miranda's expression turned deadly serious. "There's something I need to tell you. Something I think you deserve to know." Her eyes met mine and I could see a trace of fear in them. "Rossi and I became involved about a year ago."

As the meaning of her words sank in, I felt as if I'd been sucker-punched.

"Yes, that was long before you two discovered the neuromone." She paused as if to make sure I fully grasped the ramifications of what she'd said. "Rossi would visit me whenever he knew you'd be working late at the lab. For him, you have to understand, it was all about the thrill of lying in his friend's bed and screwing his wife. The 'wrongness' of it excited him. I knew that; I'm not stupid. But for me, over time, it became something more. I started to feel like a lovesick schoolgirl. Rossi would actually talk to me. He'd tell me about your work, about your concerns. The truth is, I couldn't wait for you to email me that you'd be working late, so I could be with him."

I flinched. A stranger was talking to me.

"I'm sorry. I'm not saying these things to hurt you. Honestly. And I realize it was wrong of me to leave the way I did without explaining this to you. I see that now." She took a deep breath and continued. "After a few months Rossi began to lose interest and moved on to his next conquest. I felt foolish, furious. By then he'd told me all about the neuromone you two had discovered. I went to the lab one morning to visit and..." She looked up at the ceiling. "Max, Rossi didn't drug me. I drugged *him*."

I heard the words but I couldn't believe them. She had to be lying. "You have the drug in your system," I said. "I checked for it when you were unconscious."

She sighed, as if that bit of information now required her to reveal more than she intended. "You have to understand, Rossi loves me now, wildly, passionately. It's everything I'd dreamed of. But on the trip here from Earth, I started to have...doubts. My own feelings had started to wane and by then I had already left you, I'd quit my job, I'd traveled across the solar system to Triton. There was no turning back, so I took the last dose of the neuromone myself. So I could reciprocate his feelings."

I opened my mouth but no words came out.

She stood up to leave. "When you surprised me at the catacombs, I thought it would be kinder to let you think I was the victim. That my feelings for you hadn't died on their own, that they'd been erased by a drug. But that's not the truth, Max."

"So I did all this for nothing."

She bent down and gave me a light peck on the forehead, squeezed my hand. "Be honest. You didn't come here for me. Not really. Your friend stole something of yours, and you wanted to get revenge. That's what this has all been about."

"That's not true," I said. But even as I denied it, I knew she was right, if only in part.

"I confessed everything to Rossi, and he forgave me."

Of course he would. "What about me, Miranda? What about what you've done to me?"

She remained silent for a long time. When she finally spoke, she said: "After everything I've done, you could never love me again."

I shrugged. "Yet I do."

She raised an eyebrow. "It's over, Max. It's been over for a long time now. You just didn't know it. Well, you know the truth now. Leave us alone. Don't come after me again."

With that, she turned and left the room, left my life.

If what she said was true, if what we shared had died a long time ago, why did her words cut so deep?

I staggered over to the porthole plexi and looked outside. Rossi waited at the end of the ramp. Miranda ran to him and he lifted her off her feet in a tight hug.

The door behind me slid open and Joriander entered. "You shouldn't be standing up, Maxwell," he said, exuding concern as always.

"Where's Hexa?" I said. "I want to leave as quickly as possible."

"Hexa has decided to stay behind with Olbodoh, Miranda and Rossi. She and Olbodoh are much more compatible for mating than she and I would have been."

"Oh?" This was the first time I'd ever heard a Wergen talk about mating. I didn't know what to say. "I'm...sorry."

"Why?" Joriander looked truly perplexed. "They make a perfect genetic match. In fact, they've already tethered."

"Tethered?" I said.

Joriander looked at the ground and didn't respond.

But then I looked out the plexi and I caught sight of Hexa and Olbodoh. They no longer wore their leafy headdresses. Instead, a single rubbery cord extended out of Olbodoh's flat cranium into Hexa's skull, binding them together. Olbodoh carried much of the long, bunched-up tether in his hands to avoid tripping over it.

"So this is how members of your species commit to one another?"

Again, Joriander said nothing. The Wergen seemed embarrassed by my question.

Neptune had retreated all the way west and was now just a distant blue-green marble. A dark emerald hue filled the night sky.

"I'll never get used to the way that planet sets in the sky," I said.

"Millennia ago," Joriander finally said, "this world was an asteroid floating freely in what your people call the Kuiper Belt. Then it came too close to this beautiful planet, Great Neptune, too close to the harsh glow of its incandescent beauty, and got captured in its orbit. That's why it rotates in the opposite direction of the other moons."

Joriander recited more facts about Neptune and Triton, but I tuned him out. I was focused on Miranda, almost a speck now, walking hand in hand with Rossi toward the terminal, the two Wergens trailing close behind.

'Harsh Glow' is set in the same universe as 'Longing for Langanana', which won the *Interzone* Readers' Poll for 2006. Mercurio Rivera's fiction appeared on the Locus Recommended Reading List for 2008 and the StorySouth Million Writers Notable Stories of 2008. His stories are forthcoming in *Unplugged: The Web's Best Sci-Fi and Fantasy, Download 2008* edited by Rich Horton (Wyrm Publishing) and future issues of *Interzone*. His website is mercuriorivera.com.

READERS' POLL

Once again we're asking you to let us know what you enjoyed (and what you didn't) during the previous year. You may vote for and against any number of stories or artworks published in issues 220 to 225 inclusive (see the list below). As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think – and we may publish the most interesting comments.

- To vote by post: Martin McGrath, 48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St Albans, Herts AL2 2HL
- To vote by email: interzonepoll@ntlworld.com
- To vote online: ttapress.com (website and forum)

The results will be published in Interzone issue 228, so please make sure your votes are in before 31 March

A Clown Escapes From Circus Town (221)

Will McIntosh

illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

After Everything Woke Up (220)

Rudy Rucker

Black Swan (221)

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Shannon Page & Jay Lake

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Butterfly Bomb (223)

Dominic Green

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By Starlight (225)

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Coat of Many Colours (223)

Dominic Green

illustrated by Daniel Bristow-Bailey

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Adam Tredowski

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Mother of Champions (222)

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No Longer You (224)

Katherine Sparrow & Rachel Swirsky

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Saving Diego (221)

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Silence & Roses (223)

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Sinner, Baker, Fabulist, Priest; Red Mask, Black Mask, Gentleman, Best

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Eugie Foster

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Eric Gregory

illustrated by Arthur Wang

Unexpected Outcomes (222)

Tim Pratt

Ys (222)

Aliette de Bodard

illustrated by Mark Pexton

Lappet worked the mineral vein by hand. There were machines, of course, but they weren't always suitable. This was a narrow, rotten course of pyrochlore, loaded with niobium and tantalum. It corkscrewed through the asteroid like a drunk on a crotch rocket. Machines didn't work with too many serial vector changes. A rockhead with a hot tip and a trowel, on the other hand, could follow it just fine.

She didn't mind, really. Outside work kept her away from the habitat. Ever since Malibu died, Alain had been insufferable. Tanielu had been a shit from the beginning of the tour.

The mining crews didn't try to bring in bulk ores – siderophilic chunks of mantle, for example. Those were tagged with screamer beacons. Their job was to locate and harvest the rare minerals, valuable material in small quantities that didn't show up well on remote scans or fast sensor sweeps. Anything with something else inside it had a chance of being important.

This pyrochlore was the fabled 'something else'. The loose vein was shifting again, trending into the third octant from local-z orientation. Time to cut another length of access tunnel. She clipped her hot tip and her trowel to the capture bag and carefully worked them down her back tunnel to the closest void. Lappet's handheld rock burner was stowed there.

Their rock, (217496) 2078 HJ₃, was a chunky mass of carbonatite – crustal material, an unusual find with a high potential for rare earths and a number of scarce metals. It had several voids, which was also unusual. Out in the Belt, rocks without good structural integrity tended to become smaller rocks.

Kind of like what happens to people, she thought. Alain was flying apart. Tanielu had never been anything but a monobloc of shitheadedness. Lappet wondered what that theory meant for her.

The good thing about the voids was she didn't have to back all the way up the tunnel every time she needed an equipment change. The usual alternative was to burn out a stowage cave, but the company strongly discouraged that. Ceres Mineral Resources took the view that extracting bubbles of hot rock from their precious real estate was a health and safety risk. More to the point, they were afraid of slagging something of material value.

Rockheads such as Lappet were not considered especially valuable.

She was still just as happy to be down here by herself. If she'd been running one of the remote burners, she'd be back in the hab sharing oxygen with a couple of very difficult men.

Lappet shifted the handheld burner back up her access tunnel. It was a heavy beast, massing over 100 kilograms. Tiny reaction jets positioned and stabilized the burner when it was running, but she wasn't supposed to move it while there was any power to the systems. She'd seen a couple of burner accidents early on. That was one safety precaution almost everyone bought into.

She aimed the burner roughly along her desired line of

cut. There was an imager mounted to the handlebars to check the cutting path for voids, insertions or boundaries in the rock matter itself.

The imager caused the handlebars to vibrate slightly. Her faceplate offered a data feed, but Lappet concentrated on the unit's built-in display. An even distribution on radar-gram would mean a clean cut. Anything else would mean wrestling the damned burner back down to the last void and going in by hand. She wouldn't even use the hot tip if there were another void ahead. It would be all HERO – hand extraction of rubble overhang. The problem with voids was that they might contain gas. Cutting into one with a handheld burner carried a potential for more excitement than any rockhead wanted to meet on an outside shift.

The radargram showed a substantial void, with a metallic inclusion to boot. "Damn," hissed Lappet. She'd be half her shift cutting into that one the hard way. On the other hand, she could bring up all her stowage once she'd opened up the space.

Her earbud whined. "Hard vac three, do you need assistance?" It was Tanielu. He must have been monitoring her audio feed.

Tanielu could be rough and ready whenever it pleased him to be, but when it came to Lappet he was nothing but by-the-book, all the time. She had enough infraction notices from him to fill a kit bag by way of proof.

"Negative, rock control," Lappet said.

"Then cut the chatter. Rock control out."

"Right. Hard vac three out." *You anal purge valve*, she mouthed into her faceplate. Though there was certainly a code for that buried somewhere in the company man pages, her saying it out loud wouldn't have been so much by the book.

There was no helping what lay before her. Lappet shifted the burner back down her access tunnel, then set to work the old fashioned way.

There was a reason rockheads still called themselves miners, even out here in the deep dark amid their cocoons of remote operating controls and life support and company regulations. In the end, it still came down to shovel and pick work.

Lappet labored three hours in silence punctuated only by the ragged sound of her own breathing. The carbonatite was fairly soft – it broke easily and she could push it back by hand. The trick in such a small tunnel was removing the spoil with a timing that balanced between efficiency of effort and not blocking herself in.

All in a shift's work.

Flexors and tensors in the fabric of her skinsuit braced against her muscles so she could move in the asteroid's microgravity. The tools seemed to be extensions of her arms – dagger sharp fingers and shovel-bladed hands. It was work, in the purest sense, combining the physical strain of gym time back in one of the rock ports and the thoughtful process of setting her next strike, pulling her next load.

HUMAN JAY LAKE



ILLUSTRATED BY
DANIEL BRISTOW-BAILEY

Based on her reading of the radargram, now cached in her faceplate's processors for reference, Lappet needed to shift less than three steres of rock to open her tunnel into the void. Her dig plan was to work the full two meters of access tunnel, rather than open an exploratory shaft. She would only have bothered with that if she'd thought there was any serious chance of a gas outflow. The three other voids she'd opened so far following the pyrochlore run had been vacuum.

The metallic inclusion was more on her mind. The signature didn't make a lot of sense – too dense and small to be an ore vein. She assumed it was a nodule that had gotten caught in the original lava flows which laid down this carbonatite, back when the rocks were still part of a planet.

Sometimes she wondered if they remembered those days, with slow silicate thoughts. Did rocks know regret?

"Lappet."

It took her a moment to realize she was hearing Alain's voice in her earbuds.

"Busy here, rock control," Lappet said, dismissing her fantasies of thinking rocks. She was close to breaking in. Dust fogged her lights. She needed to run a sweeper soon before her sight lines were too occluded.

"Tanielu's asleep," Alain sounded dreamy, unfocused.

She leaned against the shaft of her Robbins shovel and let her heart rate settle. The slight plucking sensation of the skinsuit wicking away her sweat was pleasant. "Alain, maybe you need to sleep, too."

"You've been out a long time." There was definitely a sing-song quality to his voice. "Come home before I lock the door and turn out the lights."

That was a threat. "Alain..." Damn Malibu for getting himself killed. Who could have known his love was the lock that kept Alain's head case tendencies shut down?

Well, the Ceres Mineral Resources psych group, for one.

Lappet thought for a few moments. He couldn't lock her out, not literally. *All* airlocks opened from the outside with a purely mechanical by-pass. Rescue was more important than piracy. Even to rock pirates. She was suited up for vac now, so whatever turning out the lights meant to Alain, it wouldn't affect her immediately. Unless he dumped the life support or purged the fuel cells, there wasn't much she couldn't recover from.

So it wasn't a threat, just an annoyance. At least to her. Some stir of conscience troubled Lappet. "Alain, can I talk to Tanielu?"

"My name is rock control, sweetie."

"In that case, my name is hard vac three." She toggled the haptics in her left glove and made Tanielu's hand sign. The habitat's central systems would send him an alarm. He'd be pissed at her for waking him up, but whatever color Alain's sky was at the moment, it wasn't the honest black of space. Someone needed to pay attention.

Alain's voice was jittery now. Had he been crying? "Well, OK. But come back soon. I miss you."

"Hard vac three out," Lappet said brusquely. Alain was on another Malibu jag. Stupid luck was the leading cause of mortality among rockheads. Human error ran a close second. The company classed those two together, though any miner who ever shipped out of a rock port could swear to the power of luck both good and bad. *Psych-outs were the third cause*, her conscience whispered.

She was out here, Alain was in there, and Tanielu could handle him.

As long as her flow was interrupted, Lappet ran the sweeper. When she'd cleared much of the dust she resumed working her face. The pyrochlore awaited.

Lappet broke into the void a few minutes later. There was a swirl in the dust. Possibly some small amount of gas *had* been trapped within. More likely it was volatiles condensing in the energy input of her lights.

She worked the opening until it was large enough to peer through. This void looked just like the others had – a relatively smooth-walled bubble in the original igneous flow which had formed this rock bit. There was a dark patch on the far wall, over a meter away from her breakthrough. She couldn't see how high up the void went.

There were probes for this sort of measurement, but in any case she meant to complete the process of extending her digging. This was mining, not science. Lappet used her number three recoilless pick to widen the opening until it was large enough to serve as the next frame of her tunnel. She took another run with the sweeper, then stepped inside.

The void ran almost three meters along her current y-axis. It was slightly over two meters across. Lappet aimed her lights upward. A darker line across the nominal ceiling showed the transit of the pyrochlore vein. She then looked at the patch on the opposite wall.

It was metal. A mass of metal about the size of a small child, with planed and curved surfaces and a regularity of form which began to frighten her.

Worked metal, *inside* an asteroid. With the same strange gray-green sheen of the caltrops which were found from time to time in caves and voids all around the Belt. Everyone said those were crystals of some kind. *This* was undeniably a made thing.

"Rock control," she whispered. "We have a problem."

Lappet backed out slowly, careful not to touch anything else inside the void, or indeed the tunnel. One by one she turned out her lights.

The habitat was staked to one flank of (217496) 2078 HJ₃. It was a large inflatable module, designed to be stowed or simply towed from location to location. In place, it was a big floppy tent with outstretched arms. Their team's rockhopper was parked nearby, also staked down to the larger mass of the asteroid, providing power and comm support for the habitat.

Lappet warily approached the hatch at the end of one arm. The pinlights for the controls were live. At least Alain hadn't dumped the power, then. It actually looked like all systems were hot. Had they been testing something? He hadn't dumped the life support either, otherwise there would be frost everywhere outside the habitat, and it wouldn't have the same whaleback curve of atmospheric pressure within.

Maybe Tanielu had responded to her alarm. For the first time since Malibu died, Lappet found herself intensely concerned about the fate of her fellow rockheads.

She didn't want to face what was down in the void alone.

Her code opened the hatch. Lappet was mildly surprised. There were two skinsuits on the other side of the airlock – Tanielu and Alain, their names stenciled on their chests and helmets.

Malibu's had been lost with its owner, the suit bracket standing as empty as a promise ever since.

No one had gone for a walk, then. Or rather, if they had, they hadn't gotten far.

Lappet stripped down and wiped off the gunk that always accumulated during a shift outside. She tugged her blue yukata over her shoulders, belted it, and keyed her way into the habitat's core.

Tanielu and Alain were at the table, drinking tea. A third sipie sat waiting for her.

"Hey, Lappet," Alain said. He was small, dark-skinned, grandparents from Haiti. Tanielu, a first-generation Samoan easily twice Alain's size, nodded. He looked exhausted.

But then he should, she thought. Tanielu'd had less than three hours to sleep between the last time she'd spoken to him over comm and when she'd sent him the alarm. "You boys alright?"

"Might be," growled Tanielu. "Depends on your problem."

She took her seat. "If you were so worried about me, why didn't you ask?"

"Didn't hear no emergency declared."

Alain nodded agreement.

Something was going on here. Lappet could feel it. The two of them were very nearly cross-eyed with tension. This was more than Alain's ongoing odyssey of disintegration.

The thought came in a rush of paranoid fear: *They knew what she'd found.*

Her quiet conscience whispered back: *Of course they did.* Everything any of them did on company time, with company equipment, was metered and miked and imaged. Just because she didn't snoop the boys' suit cams or instrument readings when they were out in hard vacuum didn't mean they weren't snooping her.

"No," she said slowly, aware she'd taken too long to answer. "No emergency declared." It was tank-switching time. Go for broke. "You know what I found."

Tanielu answered first. "No, actually we don't." He and Alain didn't even look at each other. A sure sign of collusion.

"Something's down inside this rock. Something someone made, once."

"Ever read the company man page on artifacts?" Alain asked. His voice was too bright, strangely shiny.

"Mmm...no." Lappet didn't know anyone who had.

"There's a standing bounty of one billion tai kong yuan for the discovery of a non-human artifact."

Fans whirled. A piece of equipment whined faintly. She understood their silence now. One billion TKY was fifty times a miner's likely *lifetime* earnings, barring a lucky strike bonus. Whoever could claim that would immediately be very, very wealthy, in that special way that only created more money for lifetimes to come. There were any number of people in the company's management chain who would be more than pleased to hide three bodies on their way to claim the bounty. Or simply ignore the protests of three lonely, deluded miners.

"Do they know yet?" she whispered. Lappet could hardly imagine a worse fate than being bound by wealth to these two. Being dead was one, though.

"Your data's on a batch send anyway, so no one knows so far," Tanielu said. "I cut our upstream comm feed right after you found

it. We're on an unscheduled maintenance window now as far as the company's concerned. We've got about two more hours before the routine status queries begin." He leaned forward, clutching his tea sipie close. "If you didn't know about the money, what the hell scared you so much, Ms Houston-we-have-a-problem?"

"Just...just what it *means*. What people will think. There was someone else here once. Maybe back when Marduk was a planet and not just an orbiting rockyard. We are not alone. We aren't even the first people here in the solar system." She spread her hands in appeal. "Use your *imagination*. Think what this means to the human race."

"It means a billion tai kong yuan," said Tanielu.

"It means Malibu is still dead," said Alain. "Unless your aliens can bring him back."

"It means everything changes," whispered Lappet.

Tanielu shook his head. "Our lives still aren't worth a plugged jiào. Especially."

What else is new? thought Lappet. In that moment she hated them both for being so petty, so worried, so *right*. "Fine. We send some kind of broadcast, tell the world what we found."

"How?" Tanielu again. "Our navcomm systems are completely self-contained. They lock on a company repeater, traffic goes back to Ceres. Unless we go outside and string up wires, we've got no way to reach anyone that isn't within hailing distance."

That was less than 10,000 kilometers, depending on the amount of local dust. No one was that close to them, not here in the Belt.

Lappet's mind scrambled. "Can we message the guild? Or do a send-to-all?"

"Everything's in the oversight queue back on Ceres." Also standard procedure.

Alain stirred. "I say we wipe her data feed and destroy that thing she found."

"I'll lose my berth if I'm found destroying data!" Lappet was shocked. They were all indentured to the company, but that service could be relatively rewarding – such as being a rockhead – or it could be a lifetime of negative accrual cleaning sludge filters on Ceres.

"You could be dead," Alain's eyes narrowed. "Maybe you should try it."

"Malibu's death was an acc–"

He came over the table after her, screaming incoherently. Tanielu grabbed at Alain as Lappet jumped back. She moved so quickly her slippers missed their hold and sent her rolling into the air. Tanielu and Alain followed her, still wrestling as their combined velocity pushed them past her position on a vector for the upper wall of the habitat module.

Lappet hurled her cup upward to gain downward momentum. It wasn't much, but she didn't have far to go. Outside in hard vac she'd have a line gun. In here...in here people weren't supposed to be this stupid.

She made the floor as the boys were descending on their rebound from the habitat skin. Her slippers found their plane and gave her back her artificial down. She eyed the arms locker briefly, but escalating the confrontation didn't seem to be in her interests. Tanielu was far meaner than she was, capable of almost anything. Alain was capable of anything through sheer hopeless desperation.

For a billion tai kong yuan, a whole lot of other people could

be killing mean as well.

They were right. They were both right. Damn them. She wasn't smart enough to see a way out of this that didn't have her taking a hit. The best she could do was minimize the damage.

"Tanielu, wipe the stupid data," Lappet said as the other two found their footing. "We're running out of time, and time is our safety valve. I'm going to head back out into hard vac and chisel that thing free. Nothing happens without that, no billion tai kong yuan, no losing that thing. If one of us thinks of a way to cash it in, fine. We'll all three be millionaires till long after we're dead. If I decide to fire it into an eccentric solar orbit, Tanielu can give me an infraction notice the size of Bellona-on-Mars. I'll go back to Ceres to dig sludge and we all live to be miserable another day."

"You're going to throw away a billion tai kong yuan?" asked Alain.

Tanielu turned on him with a fist cocked for a blow which the big man seemed to barely hold back. "Haven't you been listening, even to *yourself*?"

"I always listened to M-Malibu." Alain's voice thickened. "Before Lappet killed him."

"Dumb luck," Lappet said, almost the same instant as Tanielu said, "Human error." His grin was deeply feral.

It was a frayed safety cable, she thought desperately. They'd both been out in hard vac. Lappet had been slipping a bad charge cylinder out of Malibu's line gun when the cable snapped. He already had velocity due to the stone burner in his hands. In Malibu's panic the burner had flared. Or maybe the switch had stuck – that's why he was working with it on the surface in the first place. His suit's attitude jets had fired wildly, sending him into a spin, but they didn't have nearly enough power to bring him home again. The rockhopper had been cold parked, at the wrong end of a four-hour launch cycle, so Tanielu hadn't been able to scramble after Malibu.

The whole incident was increasingly muddy in Lappet's mind. All she knew was that she was holding the line gun the dead man should have had on his belt. When Lappet desperately went to fire it upward in contravention to regs and common sense alike, there was no shot due to the missing charge cylinder.

That was the story Lappet told herself every sleep shift in her dreams, when Malibu came visiting, accompanied by the clicking sound of his suit jets dry-firing after their compressed gas had run out. Sometimes she could hear Alain crying. His sobs became the dead man's breath, returned to torment Lappet.

They'd listened to Malibu screaming on the comm until his suit had passed out of range. Hearing his lover's long, slow death was what had stripped Alain of his sanity.

"I'm suiting up," Lappet said through a throat that felt as if it were closing too tight to breathe. "Delete the logs, and keep them turned off until I'm done out there. Whatever the hell I decide to do."

Outside the vacuum displayed the same knife-edged beauty it had always held for her. The deep dark was an eternity of sterility consistency. Lappet followed her safety line around the short, irregular horizon of their rock to her digging. It was blessedly out of sight of the habitat.

Spoil marked the edges of her hole, like some terrestrial rabbit burrow. Despite her fatalistic sense of hurry, Lappet stopped

and did her safety checks – life support, power systems, comm. Everything worked. Unlike Malibu, she even had her line gun.

She headed down her twisting tunnel with its gaping vein of harvested pyrochlore. Even through the rock Lappet knew exactly where the artifact was. It took her almost fifteen minutes of very careful movement to reach the last void.

The artifact still sat where she'd left it. It was wedged into a crack in the far side of the void, as if perhaps it had been pushed in from the other direction. Lappet drifted close, the attitude jets in her suit keeping her station while she studied. Not embedded in the rock, so it wasn't as old as the igneous processes which had formed this chunk of carbonatite.

She reached out her hand. Whatever this was, whoever had made it, this artifact had come across far more time to meet her here than the human race had come to send her to this meeting.

It was just a solid thing under her touch. There was no squirming, no lighting up, no tiny, toothed alien larvae leaping out. The thing didn't come at her tug, either, but Lappet had expected that. She broke out her o, oo and ooo picks and set to work freeing it from the stone.

The bindings of time slipped free one grain of rock after another.

The artifact wasn't quite as hard to maneuver as the stone burner, though it was damned near that heavy. Forty kilos of mass, at least, which meant it was dense as all get out. She pushed it ahead of her, careful not to knock it against any stony edges and thus leave a betraying trace. Lappet promised herself she would return and use the stone burner to slag the artifact's resting place back in the void.

As she emerged from her hole, something struck her hard on the shoulder. Lappet lost her hold on the safety line and bounced off the spoil pile. She used that momentum to swing herself around the dead mass of artifact trying to bring it before her as a shield.

One of the boys was spinning away from her. He had a long-arm wrench in his hands, which he was now flailing to push off the surface of their little asteroid as his attitude jets puffed. Lappet twisted her head, trying to read the name on the suit.

She felt a cold stab of pain. The stencil read MALIBU.

Malibu regained control and warped himself along a safety line.

Lappet kicked away from the surface to escape her attacker. It couldn't be, it wasn't possible. But the *suit*. She looked down. Malibu was firing his line gun into the asteroid, propelling himself upward like a missile with the kinetic reaction.

It can't be Malibu, her inner voice whispered in answer to her fears. *You saw him die.*

She tongued her comm as the dead man began to overtake her. "Rock control, where is hard vac four?"

Tanielu's response was prompt. "In his quarters, hard vac three."

"Could you...ah...check that for me?"

Alain's voice broke in. "I'm right *heeeere*."

Lappet didn't have a weapon. Not that that mattered much. The way things were going, they might as well all kill each other out here and save the company the trouble. She drew her line gun and spun along her axis, seeking a good vector to get back

out of the fight and think clearly.

She was aiming her shot when Malibu slammed into her. The line gun tumbled out of her hand, shooting into a low orbit around (217496) 2078 HJ₃. Malibu's helmet cracked into hers.

Alain leered through the faceplate. This close, she could see the stencils were just an overlay. She could have smacked him silly for that stupid stunt. Still, she would be damned before she'd kill more of her own crew.

"You're going to pay," he howled over the comm. "I'm dumping you into the deep dark."

"Why?" Lappet shouted, distracted from her moment of reluctant good will by his anger. She tried to shove the artifact at him, but only succeeded in adding to her spin. "So you can go home with this thing and die without ever getting rich!?"

"Blow that piece of crap out the airlock," he said. "You owe me a life, sweetie."

Alain swung the long-arm wrench again. The torque expended twisted his body, loosening his grip on Lappet.

She tried to duck. She wasn't going to kill again, even if he was trying to kill her first. Her helmet drifted downward, close to Alain's return swing. Lappet caught him with her free hand and tucked herself under the flailing wrench.

That was when she realized they were thirty meters above the surface and moving away from the asteroid somewhat faster than local escape velocity. Neither one of them had their line guns any more. Their suits' attitude jets weren't going to do it. Malibu had shown them that.

Alain thrashed against Lappet as she tried to think. *They had spin*. She could kick free of him at the right section of their rotation and use the imparted angular momentum to return to the surface. She might well bounce, but at least she'd have a chance.

Or I can release the artifact, she thought.

She'd lose a billion tai kong yuan that way. Pushing Alain into the deep dark would let her be worth half a billion, instead of a third.

Half a billion she'd never live to cash in.

Alain thumped on her helmet, scrabbling for the purge valve on her oxygen supply.

"Damn you to the hells of Mercury, you stupid bastard," she screamed. Lappet let go of the most significant piece of history ever to be held in human hands.

Lappet hugged Alain close as the two of them spun toward the surface of (217496) 2078 HJ₃. She was afraid of letting go of him too soon.

They slammed into the rock hard enough to crack her teeth together. Lappet was mortally afraid of the bounce. Suit jets firing, she threw out her hands and scrabbled for purchase. There were knobs and cracks and crevices all over this asteroid.

Alain grunted something incoherent. He tugged on her boot, pulling her away even as Lappet's fingers snagged on a rounded lip of rock. Her body pulled upward, the strain of both their masses stretching at her shoulders. "Stop fighting me, you damned fool!" she screamed.

The tension shifted, and for a moment she thought he'd let go. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Alain's wrench spinning away. She hit the surface again, rolling over fast to try to catch a look at him.

He was floating above her, moving much more slowly now.

Still, he was leaving, just like the billion tai kong yuan had done.

"No!" Lappet launched herself after him, slowly so as not to overshoot or drag them both into solar orbit, and caught Alain's arms. His faceplate was fogged – the bastard was crying. Counting the degrees of their rotation, she reached past his helmet and cracked his oxygen purge valve.

He was a little rocket carrying them back down slowly enough to land in one piece.

As Lappet and Alain landed, their team's rockhopper passed overhead. The ship trailed the safety lines and stakes which had held it in place. That bastard Tanielu must have had the thing warming through pre-launch cycle since she'd first found the artifact.

"A rescue," she yelled over comm, but Tanielu didn't bother to answer.

Lappet already knew where he was heading – after one billion tai kong yuan she'd just launched into solar orbit. Without the rockhopper's power supply, the habitat's fuel cells would be good for ten days, maybe two weeks max, before they froze to death while breathing their own carbon dioxide. All their comm transmission capability was gone too, except for the short range rescue screamers built into the skinsuits.

She rolled over, her elbows and shoulders aching as if the joints had separated. "Well," she told the rapidly-fading Alain. "Looks like it's just you, me and Malibu out here."

Twelve days later a pair of hardsuits made their way through the lock into the foetid interior of the habitat. Lappet looked down from her hammock near the upper wall. The oxygen was mildly better up there, and it kept her away from the mold which had taken over the floor.

Alain hung inert next to her. He hadn't spoken in four days. Of course, neither had she.

A suit speaker crackled in the thick, hard air. "You kids alive?"

"I am," Lappet croaked.

One of them raised a nozzle. *Ah*, she thought. *Tanielu made it to somewhere useful, and now he's cleaning up the competition*. Her death would be worth 333 million tai kong yuan to him, after all.

A pale cloud hissed out. Moments later she could taste sweet, sweet air.

Alain moaned. "Malibu?"

"He's righ' here," Lappet lied. "Waiting for you."

The other hardsuit jetted up to her and offered a breathing mask. "Where's your rockhopper?"

"You ha'n' hear' from Ta'ielu?" The words were hard, so very hard.

"Followed your suit screamers in after we lost signal from your team. That's all we know. What the hell happened here?"

She collapsed back in her hammock. Who knew anything now? What story to tell? Her head wasn't straight, and Alain wasn't good for anything.

Lappet struggled to speak again. "Human error," she said. "Tha's wha' happen'. Human error."

Jay Lake's most recent novels include *Green* (Tor), *Madness of Flowers* (Night Shade), and *Death of a Starship* (MonkeyBrain), all published in 2009. His short stories appear regularly in literary and genre markets worldwide.

AGAIN AND AGAIN

RACHEL SWIRSKY

It started with Lionel Caldwell, born in 1900 to strict Menonites who believed drinking, dancing, and wearing jewelry were sins against God. As soon as Lionel was old enough, he fled to the decadent city where he drank hard liquor from speak-easies, cursed using the Lord's name, and danced with women who wore bobbie socks and chin-length hair.

Lionel made a fortune selling jewelry. Rubies and sapphires even kept him flush during the Great Depression. He believed his riches could see him through any trouble – and then Art was born.

Lionel had left his breeding late, so Art grew up in the sixties. He rejected his father's conservative values in favor of peace, love, and lack of hygiene. He dated Negroes and Jewesses shamelessly, and grew out his dark hair until it fell to his waist.

"What the hell have you done?" demanded Lionel when Art came home from college, ponytail trailing down his back. Before Art could defend himself, Lionel slammed down his whiskey glass. "You make me sick," he said, and stormed out of the den.

Eventually Art annoyed his father further by marrying a Jewess whose father was a Hollywood producer. Reluctantly, Lionel attended the wedding. Drunk on the generous bar provided by Art's new father-in-law, Lionel became open-hearted. "You all are the good kind of Jews," he explained to Jack Fieldstone née Goldman over the champagne toast. For the sake of family harmony, Jack held his tongue.

Art's wife Esther was a career woman with a professorship in Art History at San Francisco State College. She made it clear that children were not happening until she had tenure and so their two daughters weren't born until the mid-eighties.

Sage was the elder, round with baby-fat, and gruff instead of sweet. She wore her hair in a rainbow-dyed Mohawk, thrust a ring through her nose, and stomped around in chains and com-

bat boots. She earned cash fixing the neighbors' computers, and spent her profits on acid tabs and E.

The younger daughter, Rue, appeared more demure – but only until she took off her loose sweatshirts and jeans to reveal her extensive tattoos and DIY brands. Tribal tattoos patterned her arms down to the wrists, making her own pale skin look like a pair of gloves. Cartoon characters and brand names formed a sarcastic billboard on her back. Japanese kanji spelled out 'Abandon all hope ye who enter here' on her inner thighs – which had on multiple occasions helped her sift wheat from chaff. She explained that she was saving up for something called lacing, which made even Sage retch a little when she heard what it was.

"I feel sorry for you two," Art told Sage and Rue. "All my generation had to do to aggravate our parents was grow out our hair. What's going to happen to your children?"

Sage turned out to be the breeder, so she got to find out. Her eldest son, Paolo, joined an experimental product trial to replace his eyes, nose, and ears with a sensitive optic strip. Lucia crossed her DNA with an ant's and grew an exoskeleton that came in handy when she renounced her parents' conscientious objector status and enlisted in the army. Javier quit college to join a colony of experimental diseasists and was generous enough to include photographs of his most recent maladies every year in his holiday cards.

Things got worse, too. By the time Paolo had kids, limb regeneration was the fashion. Teens competed to shock each other with extreme mutilations. Paolo's youngest, Gyptia, won a duel with her high school rival by cutting off her own legs, arms, breasts, and sensory organs.

When he saw what she'd done, Paolo stifled his urge to scream. "Pie," he said, carefully, "Isn't this going a bit far?"

AND AGAIN

Gyptia waited until she regrew her eyes, and then she rolled them.

By the time Gyptia reached adulthood, life spans had passed the half-millennia mark. Her generation delayed family life. Why go through all the fuss of raising babies now when they could stay fancy-free for another few decades?

At three hundred and fifty, Gyptia's biological clock proclaimed itself noisily. She backed out of the lease on her stratoflat and joined a child-friendly cooperative in historical Wyoming that produced wind energy. Current and former residents raved about its diversity. The co-op even included a few nuclear families bonded by ancient religious rituals.

Gyptia's daughter, Xyr, grew up surrounded by fields of sage brush dotted with windmills. She and her friends scrambled up the sandstone bluffs and pretended to live in stratoflats like the ones their parents had left behind.

Every option was open to Xyr: a vast range of territory for her to explore, monthly trips to see the technological and artistic wonders of the modern world, educational and entertainment databases linked in by speed pulse. Her neighbors included: polyamorists, monogamists, asexuals, traditionalists, futurists, historicists, misanthropists, genetic hybrids, biomechanical biblends, purists, anarchists, exortates, xenophiles, menthrads, ovites, alvores and ilps.

Xyr grew her hair long and straight. She had no interest in recreational drugs beyond a sip of wine at holidays. She rejected a mix of eagle and bat genes to improve her hearing and eyesight, and she kept her skin its natural multiracial brown instead of transfusing to a fashionable scarlet.

When all the adults got nostalgic and gathered to inject themselves with Lyme's disease and rubella and chicken pox, Xyr and her friends held dances on the sage brush fields, draping stream-

ers from the windmills.

Gyptia pleaded with her daughter to do something normal. "One hand," she begged. "Just the right one. Clean off at the wrist. It won't take hardly any time to grow back."

Xyr flipped her sleek blonde ponytail. She pulled a cardigan over her jumper and clasped the top button modestly at her throat, leaving the rest to drape her shoulders like a shawl. "Mom," she said, with a teenage groan that hadn't changed over centuries. "At least *try* not to be so crink."

Gyptia fretted as she stood by the door watching Xyr stride out to meet her friends on the windy fields, her rose sweater fluttering behind her.

It hurt so much every time Gyptia realized anew that there was really nothing she could do, no way she could protect Xyr from anything that mattered, up to and including herself. That was one of the ultimate difficulties of parenting, she supposed, trying to impose an older generation's thought patterns upon emerging ways of thinking. There would always be chasms between them, mother and daughter. Gyptia had to try to protect Xyr anyway. Gyptia let the door iris close and went up to her room to cut off a finger or two and do her best not to worry.

Rachel Swirsky insists that the family in 'Again and Again and Again' bears no resemblance to her own. Her paternal grandfather was not an ex-methodist, nor an anti-Semite. He did not join the Klu Klux Klan for a brief period of time, then depart because he "didn't like their methods." Her maternal grandparents were not Jews, which is why Rachel does not understand any Yiddish words, such as *schnoz* or *tucas* or *oy gevalt*. Her parents are not hippies. They would never have sent their sons to a day school in the woods where lessons on anger consisted of standing on a chair and chanting "Fuck, fuck, fuck" until they were tired. And Rachel herself has no tattoos, no piercings except in the earlobe, and only wears skirts and dresses. Sadly, this last is true.



ILLUSTRATED BY JIM BURNS

AQUESTRIA

STEPHEN GASKELL

Kelif always seems too pleased.

He stands in the doorway, hand clenching his stun baton, the tendons of his neck taut. "Thirty-five klicks north-north-east. Let's move!"

It isn't hope that drives him. I'm sure of that. His well of hope was spent weeks ago. No, what drives him now is more primal. A thirst for revenge. A chance to stoke his anger. Maybe it's because I'm a woman that I don't feel the same. Since Yemeni died, I've barely felt anything.

I finish the line I'm writing – a cold, factual sentence listing more deaths of livestock – aware that I'm annoying him by being so unhurried.

"I'll get the banshee running," he says. He thinks about saying something else, but doesn't. He sweeps out the room into the dirt yard like a wind-up toy needing to expend its coiled energy.

Wearily, I follow.

We skim over the forest canopy. If I reach out my hand I can touch the treetops. I used to do that. Used to lean out the banshee and let my fingertips brush the glossy leaves. The wind would rush through my hair, pregnant with the sweet aroma of eucalyptus, while the drone of the engines would deafen my ears.

Now the treetops are a brittle thicket of branches. The odd leaves that still cling to life are curled and dry, and the air is heavy with the smell of decay – like the reek of a compost heap. All I can see, all the way to the horizon, is a sea of grey under a thin blue sky.

The small, habitable part of the planet, the part we share with the Loyalists, is dying.

The whine of the engines is hurting my ears. Kelif is gunning the banshee near the limit. The stick is tight in his fist, thrust forward, and he does likewise, leaning towards the windshield bubble.

"Slow up," I say.

He grunts in recognition but doesn't ease up.

"You'll blow the engines."

All vehicles needing repair end up in the depot. Being Special Investigations, we don't pay, but it sure pisses the crews off, especially since the fledgling economy started stuttering.

"I don't get it with you," he says, easing back. "Crimson flares? You know what that means."

"It means we pack the body bags." I don't intend to be so blunt about it, but the words just tumble out.

"Isiria," he says, dragging out my name as if he's about to lecture a child. "Maybe one time we'll get to the drop point and we'll find an agent who's not dead – not quite. But because we've fucked around and not got out as quick as we can..."

I tune out. This is old ground. We're playing out a conversation we've had a dozen times. My usual response is a knowing sigh that results in silence. Today, I feel like an argument. "Let's get this straight for a change."

"Let's get what straight?"

He's good. Special Investigations has made him good. But I'm in the club, too, and I'm honed to spot deceptions. "The reason why you rush."

"I just told you –"

"You told me the textbook answer. The one you give to the repair crews when they haul in our trashed engines. What about the one you give yourself?"

"What are you talking about?" He twists his neck and meets my eyes, but he doesn't look for long.

"I'm talking about the kick you get out of this."

He shakes his head. "You're sick."

Far ahead, I see a plume of red smoke as if the earth is belching fire. "The only thing that's sick is this planet." Kelif adjusts course to intercept. I go on. "You don't expect to find anybody alive any more than I do."

"There's a chance."

"After what they did to Olaf and Perida?"

"We can hope."

"Don't make me laugh. You're not hoping. You lost hope before I did. No, Kelif, what makes you leap to duty is the chance to feel again. The chance to rage. To hate."

"Fuck you."

"That's it. Get it out. The thing you fear most is feeling nothing."

"Like you, you mean?" He practically spits the words, so I know I've got it right.

"Yes, like me."

Neither of us says anything else as the column of smoke gets closer.

Yemeni died slowly, painfully.

It wasn't a noble or heroic death. A bovine herdsman had accused a local landholder of poisoning his animals. Animals which had turned from graceful, healthy creatures to diseased carcasses in days.

Yemeni was called out to investigate the herdsman's claims. When he discovered no evidence of deliberate contamination he went to tell the herdsman in person. He didn't have to. He could've let the man learn secondhand, but he didn't. That was the kind of man my husband was.

On the herdsman's farm, he found the man staring into a bloody pyre of animal corpses, a terrific spectacle of heat and burning flesh.

At the news, something flipped inside the herdsman. He attacked Yemeni with a pitchfork, before he threw himself onto the flames. Yemeni's wounds were slight but deadly – the poison leaping from the fork tips into his bloodstream.

He fought hard, and I was with him through every dark hour, but eventually he succumbed. We buried him in a simple grave on a hillside next to the first town.

It felt like my very essence had been buried with him.

We weren't always divided, the Loyalists and ourselves.

Centuries ago, when the great cathedrals of metal left Tesseract, we lived united. One indivisible swell in harmonious supplication to the Elite. At least that's what the Loyalists will tell you.

Why our forefathers were sent into the heavens has been lost in the backwaters of time. Some say Tesseract was being crushed by nameless billions and needed to be thinned. Some say the Elite grew greedy and wanted to master the galaxy. Some say splintering factions engineered the exodus.

However it was, the colony ships were sent amongst the stars like dandelion seeds blown on the wind.

By the time of my birth in the third century of our journey, the split between the Loyalists and the Senastrians was irrevocable. The vessel I was born on was in the last throes of a long revolution. Loyalists stalked the dark corridors spitting scripture at anyone they met. Senastrians made bonfires of Tesseract art – cruel, imprisoning murals, paintings, and books – and offered true freedom for those who renounced their faith.

Few did.

But few was enough.

Of the hundreds of thousands scattered across the convoy, a fifth turned to the words of Senas, and with this number we built our society. The vessels divided, pledging allegiance one way or the other.

Neither side trusted the other. An arms race quickly developed. Basic maintenance of our vessels declined, all effort poured into offensive posturing. Gun emplacements bristled the outsides of our windowless churches of steel, while sanitation piping rusted inside.

I'm sure we would've killed each other if it wasn't for Aquestria.

It wasn't our destination.

Our destination was still a century away, across a great swathe of the void between two spiral arms glittering with white fire.

But there was Aquestria. Only the most northern landmass was habitable. The remainder of the planet was one vast ocean sprinkled with glassy, volcanic islands, but that fertile, living part was enough. Why it wasn't settled by one of the ancient clades of humankind was strange, but our maps were old and our need was great, so we didn't linger too long on that question.

Even the Loyalists, for all their obedience of doctrine and orders, saw that the convoy would never make its original destination. We were more than happy for them to go on without us, but another hundred years in those dark shells didn't appeal to them.

Maybe they thought it was their duty to stay with us and correct our lapse of faith.

We circled the planet for weeks, engaged in ugly negotiations. We carved the land with imaginary borders, signed peace accords, and jettisoned arms and tech into space under one another's watchful eyes.

Then we landed.

Kelif circles the plume and then sets us down in a nearby clearing. He secures the perimeter, while I unload the recorders and body bags. On a whim I grab the medical kit, irked that his words have got to me.

"Ready?" he asks, all jittery. The Loyalists have been known to ambush rescue teams even though the conventions prohibit it. "Do you think it's Oster? I think it might be Oster. Oster said he thought his cover was blown."

"Let's go," I say and nod towards the brush. What use is such speculation?

We stalk through the forest. Kelif leads, I follow. The reek of decay is intense, layers and layers of fallen foliage degrading into a diseased mulch beneath our feet. Each step is met with a squelch. It is the only sound, the inhabitants of the forest, from insect to primate, gone or dead.

We come to the drop site and stop. The flare is in the middle, still smoking, and an acrid smell hangs in the air. Nothing else. Kelif motions at the ground with his stun baton. At first I wonder what he's pointing at, but then I see it.

Beside the flare, a faint trail leads through the grass into the forest on the other side. He indicates for me to skirt the edge to the right, and then sets off to the left. For the first time in a long while I feel my heart quicken. Normally, we find them dead.

Not this time.

A dozen steps around, I fall over him. I know it's a person and not a piece of debris because he moans. I scream. Bits of leaf and dirt fleck my lips, and I brush them off as I scramble away. Then Kelif is there. He leaps onto the man, and presses his baton against the man's neck. The man doesn't resist.

With his free hand, Kelif pats down the still figure. "Who are you?" he shouts. The man doesn't answer. "I said who are you?"

"Go easy," I manage to say. I'm still in shock – we've never found anyone alive – but they must be one of ours and I know how critical these moments are. "Ease off."

Kelif rolls off. "He's clean."

"It's okay," I say softly to the trembling form. "We're Senastrians. You're safe now."

The man's torso is bare and his back is crisscrossed with bloody lines. I touch his shoulder, causing him to flinch. His skin feels raw like masonry.

"Nobody's going to hurt you anymore." They might be the most meaningful words I've spoken for months. I *can* still care. "Turn over. Please."

He doesn't move.

"It's okay. They've gone."

"We don't know that," Kelif says. He squats down, scanning left and right. "Let's get out of here."

I touch the man's shoulder again. "Can you move?"

The man draws his arms in, but before he has a chance to roll over, Kelif grabs him and hauls him to his feet. The man gives a low moan.

"Kelif!"

"Shut up." He wraps the man's left arm over his shoulder. "Help me."

Before I do, I step around to look at the man's face. Despite the haggardness, there is a youthfulness and tranquillity about him. With his tangled hair and soft eyes he has an androgynous air. "We've got to go," I say. "You understand?"

He gives a tiny nod.

"Tell me if it hurts too much."

This time he opens his mouth. No words come, but he keeps his lips parted like he's singing scales beyond my hearing. I peer closer. From the darkness I smell blood.

His tongue has been cut out.

Although the landmass was small, Aquestria was all we could've hoped for. The island was subject to a diverse climate and topography, and was composed of woodlands, plains, highlands, and long, rolling grasslands. The rich flora was matched by an astonishing variety of fauna.

We settled the western half, the Loyalists the east.

It didn't take long to discover that we weren't Aquestria's first higher animals. At sea we found steel rigs so ancient that our divers could snap girders with their bare hands. Buried metres below the dry earth of the plains we caught glimpses of ancient structures – Euclidean shapes and lines betraying intelligent makers.

Whether the members of this civilisation had evolved here, or come from the stars, we didn't know. We were too busy building our society and marking our territories to care about the past. Let future historians and archaeologists find the answers, we said.

All we knew was that they were gone.

We've brought the man to Senastria's second hospital, a single storey building with wattle and daub walls and canvas sheets covering the open windows. Senastria's other hospital – the medical facility inside the permanently berthed first starship – is overrun with the sick.

While I cleanse the man's back, Kelif paces back and forth. He stops every so often to stare at the flat, muddy land outside. He's worried that the man might try and run and he'll lose a valuable

piece of intelligence.

That's what we've come to in this war. Our own people as commodities.

I put down the sponge in the bowl of disinfectant and approach Kelif.

"Will you stop pacing?" I whisper fiercely. I glance at the man who is bravely trying to hide the sting of the chemicals. "He's not going anywhere."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"Who knows where his mind is – "

"I know."

All I can see in Kelif's face is cynicism. "I'm getting a drink," he says. "You want something?"

I shake my head.

"Get a name. Then I'll relax." He walks out.

I go back to the man. I wash him in silence. There are narrow indentations on the outside of his wrists and ankles, swellings on the soles of his feet, ripples on his back that feel like corrugated iron. I feel anger and nausea, and am happy when I can dress the wounds.

"Your body will heal." I raise the end of the bed and ease him back. I'm not trained for this. I feel awkward, but still want to give him something. "You're very brave...risking your life for us..." Is this all I can offer? Clichés?

He looks at me blankly.

"Can you write?"

He nods.

The only paper in the room is a small poster that reminds Senastrians to report suspicious activity. I rip it down and offer it to the man with my pen. The items are like toys to him. He plays with them the way a baby would, listening to the click of the cap and the scratch of his nails against the paper. Then he doodles.

He draws geometrical designs and I act pleased even though they are meaningless to me. After a time I say, "Can you write your name?"

He finds an empty space on the page and scribbles a word. Upside down it is unreadable, so I take the paper and turn it around. I gasp. The word is written in Tamaraic – the language of the Loyalists.

I lower my voice. "Never write in this language again."

"How's the heart to heart?"

I twist around. Kelif stands in the doorway. I wonder how long he's been standing there.

"You got a name yet?" he asks.

With one hand, I crumple the paper into a ball, praying he hasn't seen it. The edges bite into my skin.

"I just finished cleaning him up," I lie.

.....
The Dying began a hundred days ago. The grasses and simple plant life were the first to wither. Crops failed. Whole paddy fields died overnight, rice stalks floating dead in the water. Potatoes became riddled with black disease.

At first we thought the Loyalists had attacked us. There were some isolated skirmishes along the border. Retaliatory strikes. Then we discovered the Loyalist land was suffering exactly the same blight.

The disease climbed the food chain, killing off large and small alike. Sealife disappeared. Livestock numbers plummeted. People became fractious, squabbling over dwindling resources. A rationing system was implemented, the food dispensers of the starships the only reliable source of sustenance. Shanty towns grew around the ships.

The hatred between the Senastrians and the Loyalists that had simmered down since landing came back to the boil. The covert war turned nasty.

"And these?" Kelif stabs his finger at the final photograph. A proud couple, decent and dignified stare out. There is no reaction from the man. These are not his parents. "Let's go through these again." Kelif flips the dossier back to the first page.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," I say.

We've moved the man to a holding cell in the first starship. Dark, iron walls enclose a space furnished with a bed, table, chair, and toilet. All are bolted to the floor. Exposure to atmospheric elements has damaged the ship's electrical systems, and the wall lamps ceaselessly flicker. Kelif and I flank the man who sits in the chair.

"What do you suggest?" Kelif stares at me.

What *I should* say – what my oath to Senastria demands I say – is that this search for the man's family is a fruitless quest. That he writes in Tamaraic, and in all probability is an abandoned Loyalist. I can't do that.

I beckon Kelif to follow me out the cell. "He's traumatised. You could put him in front of a mirror and he wouldn't even recognise himself."

"So, what do we do? Nothing?"

"He needs rest. He needs to recover."

"Wake up! Look at him." The man slumps against the table, all bones and sallow skin. "He's dying."

I can't deny it. "Only because we're pushing him."

"Look, he gets the best food – not the dispenser crap the rest of us get – and he still doesn't eat." He points at an untouched bowl of legumes, shiny and lime green, next to the man. "He doesn't want to live."

I feel the man's life is tied up with my own. I know that if he dies, I die. Not in the physical sense, but in the sense of ever feeling again. "I won't help kill him." I walk away. My heart feels tiny, its puny beat overwhelmed by the metal reverberation of my footsteps.

"Whoever he is," Kelif shouts after me, "he knows things we have to know."

We thought we might have brought the pathogen with us. Like those ancient explorers who journeyed to foreign lands and killed the indigenous populations with infections far more deadly than any of their weapons.

We looked for a scapegoat. Tried to find somebody who'd skipped quarantine or ditched their fixing cocktails or smuggled in unsterilised goods.

We didn't find anybody, so we blamed the Loyalists.

In the flickering light, I hold the man's hand. Kelif is on his way with the last couple on the list. Their son was an undercover agent in the Loyalist Party. He went missing two months ago.

Footfalls and whispers echo down the corridor outside. Nobody speaks loudly here. Kelif is readying the couple for the sight of the man. Yesterday, a woman vomited in the corner of the cell. The splatter has dried, but the smell remains.

The door clanks open and three figures emerge from the gloom. I get up. Kelif introduces me. The woman stares over my shoulder as we shake hands. Her face cycles through the usual expressions. Distaste, distress, hope.

We dispensed of small talk a long time ago, and I lead them to the bedside straight away.

"Petria?" The woman's voice breaks as she speaks.

The man is so thin – sunken cheeks, stark collar bone, arms like toothpicks – that the relatives must study him for long moments to be sure.

The woman grips his head like she's choosing a piece of fruit. Her eyes rove over his features. She shakes her head and sinks into her husband's arms, whimpering.

We stand like that for a while. Nobody's written a rule book for these situations yet.

"Second opinion?" Kelif asks the man, eventually. He can be so understanding.

"It's not him," the man says angrily. They walk out. The woman's sobs grow quieter and quieter.

"Fuck!" Kelif kicks the chair, but it doesn't budge. "Mother-fucker." He hops around the cell, rubbing his foot.

"Calm down." A wound up Kelif is the last thing the man needs.

"Calm down? Calm the fuck down? We've been fucking calm too long." He bangs his heel against the ground and steps over to the bed. His breathing is shallow and fast. "I say we inject him. Or get the boys from downstairs to come up. Share their methods."

The boys from downstairs work with exposed enemy agents. We hear the agents' screams sometimes. They're not screams of joy. "That's fucking great," I say. "Why don't we just put him out of his misery?"

Kelif wraps his slab-like hands around the man's scrawny neck. "I could snap –"

"Stop it. What's the matter with you?"

Kelif squeezes. "Who are you? I want some fucking answers. Before you checkout." The man's head lolls about like a balloon on a string.

I grab Kelif's wrists. "Stop, you asshole!" It's like wrestling with a clamp. "Stop!"

I keep fighting for whatever it's worth. Then, before I know what's happening, one of those thick hands is in my face, and the next moment I'm on the floor, pain lancing up my forearm. I get up and run out.

"Isiria, wait," Kelif cries, but I'm long gone.

I pound up emergency stairwells and across narrow gangways, always seeking to go higher. I don't want to be here, in this metal cavern, in this war, in this dying land, alone.

I think my wrist is broken.

I feel a numbness spreading into my fingers.

I come to the upper hull. With my good hand I hitch myself up a short ladder that leads to a sealed hatch. I wrap the elbow of my bad arm around a rung, and tug at the wheel lock. It

comes loose with an ugly grind. Specks of rust fall into my eyes, making me blink. I spin the wheel full anti-clockwise. With a mighty push, the hatch teeters to vertical and then crashes down on the hull.

Above, the marble sky stares down indifferently.

I haul myself out and slump onto the ship's coppery shell. I'm breathing hard. Turning my head I see the ship's convex landscape of telemetry turrets and engineering emplacements.

Far below, a thousand makeshift homes made from canvas tents and prefab panels dapple the ground. Smoke from a half dozen fires drifts across the camp. This high up, the people look like ants, except, when I watch them move, the comparison fails. There's no purpose to these people's movements, and they wander about like lost souls.

The worst thing is knowing the Loyalists are suffering the same menace, and yet still we fight.

"Isi."

The voice makes me jump. Kelif's head pokes out of the hatch. I place my good hand above my heart and look away.

"This is some view," he says and clambers out. He stands with his back to me. With a good kick I could send him tumbling over the edge.

"How did you find me?"

"You kept your tracker on."

Shit. I stare contemptuously at the bracelet that squeezes my swollen wrist.

"It's better this way," he says. "I didn't want you thinking what happened was anything but a regrettable accident."

"An accident?"

"How you were knocked over in the course of pacifying the man."

"Pacifying?"

"If there's any blame to attach it's with him."

I can't believe I'm hearing this from this man I've worked with for so long. I think I would've accepted an apology, a sign of contrition.

"Yes, it was his fault," I say, seething.

"Good, I'm glad we understand each other." He crouches down next to me. I smell old sweat in his dirty uniform. "That looks nasty. We should get you to the infirmary."

"What happens to the man?"

"A hopeless case. We let S.I.T. see if they can do any better."

A coldness spreads from my heart. S.I.T. Special Intelligence Team. The boys downstairs.

I only have a day or so to act, but in that time I gather food (seven kilos of legumes, three of pulses, eight of dispenser slop), medicines (immuno boosters, toxicant suppressors, endocrine control drugs), fleeces, a portable shelter, and a Tamaraic language text. A lab technician caught me in the medical stores, but I spun a story about a sickly child and she ended up giving me her blessing.

I bury everything in a smart crate on the edge of the encampment. Then I head back to the ship.

Getting to the cell is easy. The nightshift guards are used to my nocturnal visits, and they let me slip into the bowels of the building with only a sly nod of acknowledgement. They think I have fallen for the man.

At the entrance to the cells there is a new guard. I study the scar that runs from his missing left eye to jaw, while he angles my ident in the gloomy, dancing light.

"Detainee name?"

"He doesn't have one."

"Cell two-dee? The bag of bones with no tongue?"

I hate the way they label him, but now's not the time to argue.

I nod.

The man leans into me. "He's not so well, tonight. Come another time."

Kelif must've passed the word that the man is Loyalist. I snatch my ident from his hand. "I'll go to a doctor if I want a medical opinion. Now, open the fucking gate."

The man is in no state to run. He's curled in the foetal position, hacking up wads of congealed blood. A crescent of bruises line his face. I clean him up as best I can, tears stinging my eyes. "We're leaving here. We're going far away." I pull the blanket off the bed and wrap it around his shoulders. "I just have one thing to do first."

I go back to the gate.

"Short visit," the guard says with a smile.

"Were you part of it?" I carefully slip the stun-baton from my belt. It feels unnatural in my left-hand.

A klaxon sounds as the gate swings open. He points to his scar. "They cost me an eye," he growls.

I get up close to him. "Did it make you feel good?" He smells clammy like the dying earth. Mud cakes his uniform.

He licks his lips.

I swing the baton, at the same time kneeling him as hard as I can.

The blows lack synchronicity, my kneecap connecting with his groin too soon. He doubles up and the baton skates off his matted hair. He puffs and groans, but still manages to latch onto my limp hand. I scream in pain, bones crunching in my wrist.

I don't make a mistake with my second blow.

The sound of the baton striking his head is a dull thud like a mallet onto a tent peg. Hair sticks to the baton's shaft at the impact point. He crumples into an ugly heap over my feet. I kick him off and then wrench off my tracking bracelet.

I only seem to have enough compassion for one these days.

I crouch down. Everything is silent. Screams don't mean much anymore.

We bound down deserted corridors, the man clinging tight like a bony shawl. My wrist throbs in pain. I remember how exciting it felt when Yemeni carried me across the wheat fields, stalk heads tickling my bare feet. Does this man feel any similar excitement now? The passages are narrow, spaghetti piping wriggling over the walls. The air is cold. The ship shows signs of decay like the land outside. Blistered conduits and cracked capillary tubes. We will never leave.

At least he's light. I can't help but laugh bitterly at that.

The escape proves to be a simple matter. There should be guards manning the exits, and I'm somewhat disappointed when we find nobody. Later I will spend some of my unchannelled adrenaline swooping the stolen banshee planetwards and then pulling it back up at the last moment.

"We're here," I say, when we reach our ride. I pull off the branches with their leaves like rice paper and slide the man onto the

passenger seat. For the short hop to the crate I keep low to the ground. The yo-yo journey perks the man up. After I've loaded everything he is sitting up as brightly as a man in his condition can.

I swallow some painkillers and make him take a few as well. I place my hand over his. "You won't suffer any more. I mean it this time. Just you and me."

He squeezes and then uncouples his hand from mine and taps the navigation monitor.

"You know a good place?" I adjust the scale so that the map zooms out to show the whole island.

With a curled finger he indicates a stretch of coastline to the south. I up the magnification. The physicals mark it as a desolate area. No topsoil. High salt concentration from stiff inshore winds. It should be deserted, but will we be able to survive? "Here?"

He nods.

"Okay." It's no worse than the original destination I had in mind. In fact, because the idea comes from him, it's better. They won't be able to use my profile to predict where we've gone.

I close the hatch and fire up the engines.

By dawn we're skimming over the waves. Spumy crests crash against the chalk cliffs. Rocky outcrops split the seawater into channels that rise and fall chaotically. It would be inhospitable even if the planet wasn't dying.

"Are we close?" I ask, irritated. Last night's decision doesn't seem so good right now.

The man has a hand up to the glass and his nose – bloody and crooked – is not far behind. He doesn't make any motion, too caught up in the landscape to notice my question.

I shake my head and stare ahead, disgusted.

It is then that I see the birds. Gulls. One or two dozen wheeling high above a craggy spire of rock. The man makes a sound with his butchered mouth that somehow I know is delight. The expression on his face is more complex than that though. It's the deep, faraway look people have when you mention a time that's gone. I've seen that expression plenty in the last months.

I ease down the throttle, ready to land.

The habitation is cut into the cliff face. A crude stone path – enormous slabbed steps so deep I have to descend the way a child does, one ungainly step at a time – leads into the cavernous interior. Choked sunlight creeps in through a narrow passage from the ground above. There is the primitive facsimile of furniture. Odd shaped rocks as seats or tables. Petrified tree trunks lashed together and covered with the hide of an enormous animal as a bed. A medley of tools – chisel, hammer, saw – lies scattered around. In the middle of the chamber, inside a ring of blackened stones, sits the detritus of an ancient fire – ashes and pieces of cinder. Everything is huge as if catering for giants.

The man, leaning on my shoulder, gestures to the bed, and I help him to it. He collapses, legs dangling over the edge. I haul him inwards and make a note to myself to bring the blankets down first.

It is as I am climbing the stone staircase that I fall to my knees and stare at the cracks in the rock. *What have I done? Who is this man I have sacrificed everything for? Where has he led me?*

What if I can't save him? What if he dies?

My stomach knots up and bile stings the back of my throat.
I lean over the edge and vomit into the foamy waters.

Days pass. The man is feverish. His sickness helps me forget where I am. My task is to heal him. I try to put everything else from my mind. I become familiar with our home, with the landscape around. Tenacious brackens which bear sweet, edible berries are the only vegetation in a terrain of coarse grasses. On the horizon I see the edge of a blackened forest.

While the man sleeps, which is most the time, I study the Tamarai language, anticipating the day he is able to write again. I have to admit there is an elegance to the language that is missing from our own tongue.

Sometimes I go out in the banshee.

One morning, not twenty clicks from the cave, I spy a cluster of buildings on an escarpment that marks the beginning of rolling hills. There is no sign of life, but I land the banshee well away and hike closer just in case. From a hundred paces I see that it's a Loyalist place, and I feel a little easier about any thefts I might make. As I raid the seed casks under the eaves I realize the place isn't deserted. A woman is singing a lullaby, her proud voice spilling out from a high window further down the building.

I have to look. I have to see who I am stealing from.

Keeping it upright, I spin the cask until it is under the window. Delicately, I climb onto the top and then wait, crouching. The woman is still singing. It is the same song, the same verse, over and over again. For a moment I wonder if I'm listening to a broken record rather than a living human, but if I listen carefully I can hear occasional cracked notes and sighs and I know the voice comes from flesh and blood. I place my palms on the wall and slide myself upwards. The bricks feel damp, and I can smell mould. My body warmth flows away and I shiver.

My fingers reach the sill. I take a breath and lift up my head.

The room is gloomy like the hills. It looks bare save for the silhouette of the woman and a small bed in the corner. As my eyes adjust I see that there is a child standing next to the woman, a thin arm wrapped around the woman's legs. The small bed in the corner is not a bed, but a cot, wooden rails like emaciated cell bars.

There is something in the cot.

The woman is dressed in traditional Loyalist clothing – an all-in-one piece of flowing black. She faces the cot. There is a baby inside. I can see the shape of its chubby limbs and the curve of its round, doughy head. It isn't moving. Its cheeks are ebony white.

It's dead.

Instinctively, my hand darts to cover my mouth, and in doing so I knock some loose debris off the sill. It falls inside the room, smashing into pieces on the stone floor.

The child twists around. It's a girl, pretty eyes puffed and watery. She has a look nobody of that age should be familiar with. A look of utter loss, utter incomprehension – like the look I saw in the mirror the day Yemeni died. She sees me but does nothing and eventually turns back. Her disregard chills me. As if she can see my plight. See that I am of no consequence whether friend or enemy.

Am I a wraith now, dead like the land?

The woman doesn't break from the song.

I wheel the cask back, empty the bag of seed, and leave.

We get by.

The decline of the land seems to have been arrested. The bare patches of earth that pepper the brushland are no longer multiplying. The numbers of the crustaceans that riddle the rock pools at low tide have stabilised.

One morning, after catching an unusually hearty fish – it must be as long as my hand – I climb the rock face and return to the cave.

"How's your appetite, today," I ask, unable to keep the pride from my voice. I unwrap the fish from the seaweed that swaddles it, and show the man. Who knew scales and black eyes and that piscine stench could be so mouth watering?

His eyes reveal gratitude, but not hunger. He will eat it, but not in the greedy way you might imagine. He has bundled a small animal hide under his head, and he sits slightly up in the bed. He motions for the paper and stylus.

I pass him the objects, admiring his inner stamina. He's still frail, but the fever has broken, and the cuts and bruises have faded. He writes with bold strokes because fine calligraphy is beyond his trembling hand. A few words cover a single sheet. Until now he has only written about immediate needs – a request for more blankets or the attention of a wound. This time the message is different.

I must go back.

I scan the words again in case I've misread something. There's no mistake. "Go back where?" I ask, trying not to understand.

Another sheet. Two words.

The town.

"What are you talking about? Go back to the town? To the starship? To the cell?"

Wherever. The town.

"They'll kill you. They'll kill me."

He shrugs.

This is too much for me. I fling the fish package at the wall. It hits with a slap and leaves a damp mark. "Why?" I thrust the stylus back into his hand. "Tell me why."

He shakes his head and brushes the paper onto the floor.

"I won't take you back."

He turns his back to me. Thin white scar lines crisscross his spine. Stalemate.

"Who are you?" A few days have passed since our disagreement. I sit on the edge of his bed, and let him sip water from a canteen. The fear he might slip out when I'm asleep terrifies me. I've hidden the banshee in an alcove in the next bay. I sleep in the cave's entrance. His identity has begun to consume me the way it consumed Kelif.

He makes no effort to respond. No expression. No gesture.

"Are you Loyalist or Senastrian?" I've never spoken to him like this before. Who he was didn't matter before. Now it does.

He doesn't move.

"Maybe you're neither. Maybe you came down from the ships alone. Which ship were you on?"

Nothing.

"You came down from the ship alone and you came here. You came here and set up a home so you could live apart from us.

All of us."

He snorts.

"Right, that doesn't make sense. Why would you want to go back to the town?" I hate airing my ill-thought conjectures like this. I hate being an interrogator. "Fuck this," I say, and go outside.

I wake, body stiff and cold. Dawn's gauzy light spills onto the passage wall, and the tang of the sea is strong. A clanging sound echoes from the chamber. I rub my bleary eyes, discard my covers, and get up. The man is banging his metal bowl against the floor. I wonder if he's tried to walk yet. Perhaps he's perfectly capable of walking and he's disguising it, so that one day he might up and leave without my knowledge.

Will I end up chaining him?

"I'm here. What is it?"

He levers himself back onto the bed and sits cross-legged. He gets stronger every day, gaunt lines of his face slowly disappearing, ribs no longer so visible. He makes a handwriting motion.

I'll tell you, he writes.

I'm wide awake, night's cloak thrown clear off. I feel my eyes large and greedy as if I'm a child who's spied a slice of cake.

Then you take me back.

My anticipation deflates like a pierced balloon.

An exchange. His identity for passage back.

A bleakness rushes through me. I am paralysed. To live this life, to feed this man, to be able to do this day in day out for the rest of my days, I must know him.

But to know him means to lose him.

"I'll do it."

What choice do I have? Could I lie to him? Tell him I'll take him back and then go back on my word after he tells me who he is. No. Could I chain him up like an animal and still live with myself, live with him? No. I will be true even if it leads to death.

On the paper, he draws the banshee.

"You want to show me something?"

He nods. I pass him the crutches I have fashioned from the branches of the dead hardwoods. He leans them against the bed, keen for me to read something else before we leave.

Nobody must know. He grabs my hand and presses it over my heart. He's crushing my fingers, gaze like lasers.

"I swear," I say, afraid. "This stays with me."

He lets go, and hobbles out. I follow, rubbing my hand.

We hug the coastline for the first hour, the ocean glittering to the right, brilliant chalk cliffs to the left. I don't speak. I can still feel his hand around mine. At a long delta he indicates to head inland. The banks of the streams are flush with new life, lime shoots and bursts of reeds. The tributaries coalesce into a slow moving river which flows through a foggy moorland. I can barely see the ground below, but the man seems to know the land intimately, using landmarks invisible to me to guide us.

He motions to set down and I land on a craggy rise, the engines momentarily scattering the mist before it shrouds us again. We trek, my pack empty save for torch, fish oils, and rope. Our path descends and I find the mossy walls of a steep ravine rising up around us.

The man stops. He points to a thin cleft in the rock, a pitch

black scar like a rift into another reality.

"Here?" I ask, uncomfortable. I hate the claustrophobic dark – it brings back too many bad memories from time aboard the ship. A sickly sweet smell like rotting flowers emanates from the fissure.

The crutches clatter against the rock. The man drops to his knees and heaves himself in, the calloused soles of his feet disappearing last. I glance up and down the ravine. My eyes alight on the purple petals of a climber plant that blooms from a crack in the rock. I wonder if it will be the last living thing I'll see.

The shaft is narrow and angles downwards. Underneath, the damp passage undulates as if eroded over the aeons by running water. The sides are more ragged. From time to time I hit my shoulder against a jagged edge and curse aloud. The ebb and flow of air causes a regular whining noise that makes me imagine the earth itself is wheezing.

Eventually, I bring my arm forward and slam into the man's leg. He turns around and I feel his hand grasping my own and helping me to my feet. I delve into the pack and fish out the torch. We're stood in a low-ceilinged chamber, phosphorescent algae dappling the walls. The ground ahead is a perfect glassy black like a lidless eye. I only realize it is water when I step forward.

I twist around, raising the torch, half expecting the man to be rushing me. He isn't. He is securing the rope to a thick stalagmite. "What now?" I ask, betraying my nerves.

He finishes tying the rope, removes his clothes, and smears the fish oils over his body. Then he dives into the inky pool. When the rope goes taut I do likewise.

The water is icy. Its first touch causes me to gasp. Pockets of air bubble upwards. I surface, take another breath, and dive again. My body quickly numbs, the only sensation the rough feel of the twine, first in one hand, then in the other. I count my strokes. Five...ten...fifteen...I feel my muscles tire...twenty...lungs begin to burn...twenty-five...panicking...twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight...lights above...twenty-nine...I crash through the surface and draw a mighty breath. The man is there for me. His skin is slick and warm. His forearms slide over my waist, seeking purchase, before he hauls me onto the shore.

The ground is slimy like the muddy bank of a river. Above, lights twinkle – a product of my dizziness, I think. I shake my head, expecting them to fade but they remain. I'm beneath the boughs and foliage of a tree.

A grand, ancient, monster of a tree.

Canopy stacked upon canopy, a cathedral of nature. On the lowest layer, where the branches are thickest, enormous pods hang.

I get up, bandy legged from both the swim and the spectacle. "A tree? Underground?" I cough. Some of the pods have fallen to the mire, their skins broken like cracked eggshells. I approach the nearest one. It is a sickly yellow colour, constructed from fibrous threads, and about half a man's height in length. Inside, a distinct shape is imprinted like a pottery mould.

Suddenly, I see it for what it is. I scrabble backwards, but my heels can't get a foothold in the mud and I slip over.

It's a mould of a human curled up like a foetus.

A cocoon.

I struggle away, kicking mud everywhere, limbs flailing like a demented insect turned upside down. This is too much. I need

air. I need light.

I turn onto my front and jump up...only to come face to face with the man.

We fly over the brackens, the mist dispersed, the majestic landscape clear all the way to the horizon. Everywhere I see renewal, growth. Dazzling brooks, blooms of water lilies in blue lakes. My eyes flitter between the terrain and the man beside me.

They are one and the same.

"One and the same," I say, giggling like a child.

He's been born many times – as many times, and in as many guises, as the number of races who've settled on the planet.

Call him an avatar.

A caretaker.

The joke of an ancient race.

The planet's fortunes mirror his own. Kill him and you murder the planet. Wound him and you scar it. Poison him and toxins will course the veins of every piece of vegetation, rotting and sickening the land. It is the ultimate test of a society's health; how does a civilization treat its lowest common denominator, its average citizen?

Not very well, apparently. Not even amnesty from a natural death has prevented his demise thus far.

He'll always come back though. Come back when the next race drops by.

Hope springs eternal, I guess.

So, he is no longer the nameless man.

He is Aquestria.

When we return to the cave on the cliff face, while he sleeps, using the sledgehammer that sits propped against the passageway wall, head rusty from an age of sea air, I break both his legs.

I couldn't let him go back, could I? To let him go back would be to kill us all. I may be a monster, but I'm not that great a monster.

And I have kept my other promise.

My promise to never abandon him. To always care for him so long as it is in my power to do so. Like him the land is crippled. But crippled is still alive, and alive is better than dead.

Sometimes, when I indulge myself, I think that the poor harvests and the stunted animals might be a great leveller for the two sides – that I have actually helped contribute to the fragile peace. But that is only sometimes.

I grow old while he doesn't age. One day I'll be too frail to prevent him escaping. Of course by then he'll have been forgotten and will just be another refugee from across the border.

I hope my people treat him better that time.

Stephen Gaskell is still seeking the perfect place to write, but thinks the Rare Books & Music Reading Room at the British Library comes pretty close. If they allowed coffee and cake it would be ideal. His short fiction has appeared in many venues including *Nature*, *Writers of the Future*, and *Cosmos Magazine*. Visit him online at stephengaskell.com.

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THE SECRET HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION

James Patrick Kelly & John Kessel, eds
Tachyon Publications, 432pp, \$14.95/£12.50 pb

Reviewed by Andy Hedgecock

Once I'd recovered from my exasperation at the editors' pompous and fatuous introduction and picked the book up from where I'd flung it, I was utterly absorbed by Kelly and Kessel's collection. Almost every one of the 19 stories collected here is well crafted, provocative and crammed with vivid imagery. So I'm going to take a leaf out of master lyricist Johnny Mercer's songbook and spread joy up to the maximum. I'll deal with bringing gloom down to the minimum in due course.

The collection covers 40 years of writing by glittering stars in the sf firmament, such as Thomas Disch, Ursula Le Guin and Gene Wolfe, as well as sf stories by the likes of Steven Millhauser, Don DeLillo and T.C. Boyle – writers lauded by mainstream critics in spite of a predilection for the fantastic. The editors set out to present a historical sweep, and the stories are printed in order of publication.

The book opens with 'Angouleme', a tale of urban anomie, violence and teenage disaffection from Thomas Disch's deeply dystopian 334 saga. Set in a society blighted by overpopulation and class division, the tale has lost none of its impact since it first appeared in *New Worlds* in 1971.

The next story is another classic, Ursula Le Guin's fable 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas', which concerns a shining

utopia with a dark secret at its heart. I loved it when I read it 30 odd years ago and, again, it still packs a punch. More alert readers will already appreciate that the 'Secret History' of the collection's title does not relate to the undiscovered nature of the authors or their stories.

Carter Scholz's 'The Nine Billion Names of God' offers a more accessible version of a philosophical game on the theme of plagiarism played by Borges 40 years earlier. If Scholz lacks the philosophical rigour of Borges, he did, at least, make me laugh.

One of the most harrowing tales in the collection is 'Salvador' by Lucius Shepard. First published in 1984, six years before the film *Jacob's Ladder* dealt with a similar theme, the story features US combat troops fuelled by hallucinogenic drugs and struggling to distinguish reality from chemically induced perception.

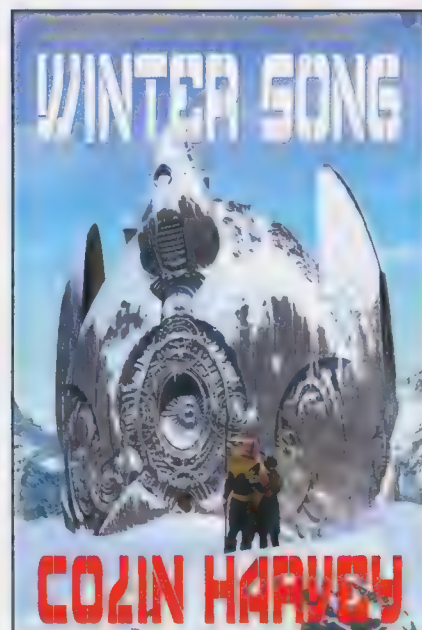
The book closes with 'The Wizard of West Orange', Steven Millhauser's tale of a nineteenth century VR machine, the development of which is driven by hunger for knowledge and lust for sensation.

Millhauser's image rich but precision-pared prose paints a picture of spiritual growth and moral corrosion, capturing perfectly the complex psychological impact of tools and technologies.

The collection also includes fine stories by Margaret Atwood, Michael Chabon, Kate Wilhelm, Jonathan Lethem and Connie Willis.

The value of this collection is that it showcases some of the best work by some of the most influential exponents of fantastic fiction over the last four decades. If I have a quibble with the make-up of the collection it's that some of the stories will be familiar to older readers, particularly the well established classics from the 1960s and 1970s.

If only the editors hadn't treated themselves to a lengthy, irritating and utterly irrelevant introduction setting out the purpose of the collection. This is, it seems, to demonstrate genre boundaries are crumbling: apparently the best sf is informed by developments in literary fiction and the literary mainstream has been revived by genre influences. Come on guys, this isn't a secret: anyone likely to lash their cash out on this collection will take this idea for granted. If only the editors, and the burgeoning ranks of sf manifesto writers, subscribed to the view expressed here by Steven Millhauser: "I'm fanatically reluctant to say that fiction ought to do one thing rather than another... I want it to exhilarate me..."



WINTER SONG

Colin Harvey

Angry Robot, 402pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

Technologically augmented humans, surviving in a galaxy where humanity has spread and evolved across the stars, haven't yet become a cliché of modern space-based science fiction, but it's already becoming a challenge to do something different with them – a challenge that Colin Harvey successfully takes on here. Starting with a bang – almost literally, with main character Karl Allman's 'intelligent' ship being attacked and ultimately destroyed by distant, unseen enemies – the focus of the novel quickly switches to a young woman called Bera, who lives in a small farmstead on the overlooked colony world of Ishmeimur. Through her eyes, we begin to see this as a place where the daily struggle for personal and communal survival leaves little room for looking to the future.

As an imagined human colony, Ishmeimur has two notable selling points to the jaded sf reader: firstly, the society portrayed has an interesting slant, based as it is on Icelandic/Scandinavian lines; secondly, the planet's ecology can be best described as 'not quite enough' – not quite enough gravity to permanently hold on to the atmosphere, not quite enough carbon dioxide to hold on to the heat, and not quite enough water to allow planet-wide settlement. This is a colony that's slowly but surely falling backwards, forgotten and overlooked after a galaxy-spanning human

conflict that still echoes in the distance.

The titular *Winter Song* is a near-mythical colony seed ship that Karl realises could be his only route off the planet. Getting to it, however, is problematic. For starters, his fall to Ishmeimur almost killed him, and the months of food and care provided by Bera puts him in significant debt to her stepfather and his host Ragnar, hard leader of the small farming community who originally found him. When Karl and Bera decide to make the 500-odd mile journey towards the *Winter Song*, they not only face the dangers of the planet's ecology, but also a pursuing Ragnar who is determined to issue his own kind of justice to the 'starman'.

If you're looking for a lightweight, post-cyberpunk tale of augmented human against the weird inhabitants of a hostile alien world, then this may well surprise you – it's a relatively slow burner, but the drama that holds your interest is grounded on the believable conflict of interests between Karl (who for much of the first half of the book is also coping with a rather frayed-at-the-edges downloaded personality nicknamed Loki), Bera and Ragnar. This draws you into the main section of the novel, the long trek towards *Winter Song* that pushes the characters to their physical and psychological limits, punctuated by the many genuine sacrifices each must make in order to survive.

This is a novel about many things, not least the shape and form a culture will revert to when the hard times come, and to what extent both individual and communal freedoms are lost as a result. The novel also touches on the all-too-human ability to fail to see sentience and intelligence in another species. Ultimately, though, the focus of the novel becomes the relationship between humans and an environment that was only partially 'terraformed'; and this, perhaps, is where the novel is less satisfactory when huge ideas – such as Karl's comet-shattering plan to try and repair the planet's ozone layer, or at least mend it sufficiently to delay an impending environmental collapse – take precedence over the intimate character interaction that had successfully powered the novel up to that point.

Winter Song is solidly plotted, and the reader can forgive some obvious chestnuts (not only does Karl discover the ancient ship, he's still able to fly it into orbit) thanks to some genuine surprises along the way. Given the relatively open ending – though it does work as a satisfying conclusion in its own right – you can't help but wonder if the author plans to visit Ishmeimur again.



THE CARDINAL'S BLADES

Pierre Pevel

Gollancz, 384pp, £18.99 hb/£9.99 pb

Reviewed by Ian Hunter

In case you haven't guessed from the title, we are in seventeenth century Paris in a world that might have been created by Alexandre Dumas writing with Anne McCaffrey, because this is a France – nay, Europe – where humans and dragons co-exist. If you are familiar with Dumas' novels, or even just the many movie adaptations of *The Three Musketeers*, there are a few names you might recognise, including Cardinal Richelieu, the Comte de Rochefort, and a certain Athos. There are also dragons, which come in various guises: some are kept as pets, some act like winged horses, and others are scaly carrier pigeons. Some have even mated with humans, producing human-like people (until they open their eyes), but others are ancient, more powerful creatures with terrible ambition. There is even a disease called ranse which can be contracted from dragons and which turns humans into horrible mutations.

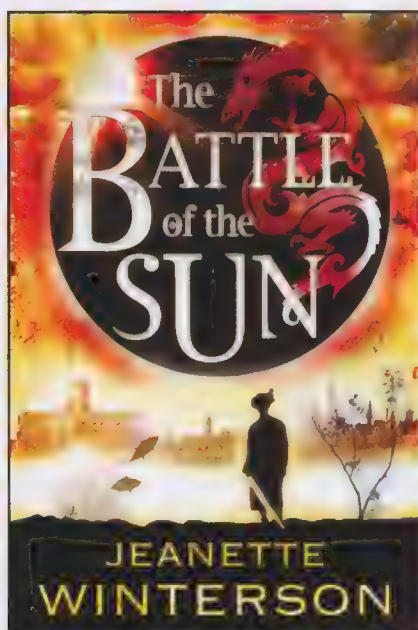
There is a scene in the first Grendel/Batman crossover (okay, I confess, I collect comics) when Grendel is surrounded by Commissioner Gordon and a bunch of armed cops and says something like, "You really don't know who you are dealing with here, do you?" Likewise, there are several moments at the start of *The Cardinal's Blade* when our heroes could say the same thing as they face duellists, assassins,

cutthroats, brigands, officials, and even half-breeds (part human, part dragon) and see them off with ease. The long first part of the novel does come across like a comic book: fast, furious, and filled with action and very, very short chapters. Despite the pace, that first part was confusing – there are too many characters, and too many of them have royal titles, and there are infuriating gaps before they appear again, even when they are left in jeopardy. What was also infuriating were the in-depth descriptions of Parisian architecture and the equally in-depth descriptions of what people were wearing and how they carry themselves, which smacked of padding.

When it opens, Richelieu's Blades – his 'A' Team – have been disbanded and are in disgrace, with one of their number slain in a previous action and another missing, presumed dead. The survivors are misfits – and pretty much stock characters – trying to eke out a living as a musketeer or a likable rogue, or by giving fencing lessons on the side, but now their former leader, Captain La Fargue, has been summoned by Richelieu and ordered to reform the Blades and they are given the mission of locating a Spanish nobleman who is at large somewhere in Paris. However, there are also other forces at work, and agents of France's deadliest enemy – the Spanish – are trying hard to establish a lodge of the Black Claw within France. There are plots within plots, schemes within schemes. No-one is who they seem and no-one can really be trusted.

The novel consists of four parts with the final part containing an epilogue, and I felt a bit cheated by that final part as some elements came out of left field to give us what, in TV terms, would be described as the season finale, setting us up for the sequel, *The Alchemist in the Shadows*, which is due out next year. The whole book is over three hundred and eighty pages long, and includes maps of Paris and even a song, but there are almost eighty chapters and quite a few of them are only two pages long, and I did come to the end of some of them (which were mainly dialogue driven) and wonder how that had advanced the plot, and why it was even there.

If you are looking for a swashbuckler, you probably won't be disappointed with *The Cardinal's Blades*, especially if you like your swashbuckling with a smattering of fantasy. Think of it as alternative history with the emphasis more on history than fantasy; but there could have been much more done with the fantasy than is done here.



THE BATTLE OF THE SUN

Jeanette Winterson

Bloomsbury, 400pp, £10.99 hb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

The Battle of the Sun is the tangential sequel to *Tanglewreck* (2006), Jeanette Winterson's earlier novel for children. Possibly, given the emphasis on movement in time, it is *Tanglewreck's* prequel, or even the other part of a diptych, separate but intimately related, for the two books share several characters and some previously referenced events are re-examined. Whereas *Tanglewreck*, preoccupied as it was with people seeking to control time, clearly owed a debt to the science fiction genre, *The Battle of the Sun* appears to be more akin to a fantasy novel. If I seem hesitant in saying this, it is because I am mindful that Winterson seeks to refuse genre labels but also, in part, because the novel itself seems curiously uncertain about its own nature.

It is intended to be a children's novel but whereas a writer like Diana Wynne Jones seems able to engage simultaneously with adults and children, mainly by ignoring any perceived differences between them, Winterson's narrative suggests that she is self-consciously aware of the presence of that younger audience, and as a result is holding back the 'real' story.

The story we learn is this: Jack Snap, who lives with his mother, and who is about to be apprenticed to a printer, is instead kidnapped on his twelfth birthday. He finds himself imprisoned with six other boys, the captives of a mysterious magus,

who claims that Jack is the Radiant Boy, the child who will help him achieve his desire to transform London into gold and show the magnitude of his powers. Jack is a resourceful child, and immediately sets to work to win his freedom. This rapidly takes the form of what is clearly an alchemical quest, in which improbable objects must be found and impossible tasks undertaken.

While Jack's adventures are overtly fantastical, his approach to them is very matter-of-fact. Winterson is clearly playing with the expectations raised by quests in fairy tales, especially those involving boys called Jack, and so far as it goes, it is extremely enjoyable. *The Battle of the Sun* is perhaps most akin to some kind of theatrical spectacle, appropriate to London in 1601. It has dazzling set-pieces, and a cast of startling real and fantastical characters. There are some genuinely sad and shocking moments, and even a *deus ex machina*, admittedly a rather problematic one, not to mention an appropriate denouement. At almost the last moment in history when the real and the fantastical can comfortably coexist, it seems entirely reasonable that there should still be dragons or mysterious half-people grown in bottles. And yet also the story possesses that sense of overly neat finality that one finds in Shakespearean comedy, with order a little too firmly restored, even though it is clear that the story's deeper currents are still seething.

For there is clearly a darker side to this narrative which unfortunately remains occluded, apart from occasional, frustrating glimpses. One striking example is that Jack is frequently referred to by other characters as 'Adam Kadmon'. The repetition of the name suggests it is significant, but this is not really explored, and for those with a limited knowledge of alchemy or Kabbalah, the extra layers of meaning are lost. Winterson constantly hints but refuses to engage. Perhaps she didn't want to confuse her perceived audience, perhaps she genuinely didn't know where that strand of story went and just left it to hang loose, teasing the reader. Either way, its half-presence points up the sense that so much is left unsaid, and that some of it needed to be spelled out.

In the end, I cannot decide whether Winterson tried to resist genre labels too hard and left herself with no place to stand, or whether she felt too constrained by her perceived audience to let rip imaginatively, but either way, *The Battle of the Sun* left me feeling frustrated. So much was happening just around the corner, but the author always held me back from going to look.



BRAIN THIEF

Alexander Jablovkov

Tor, 383pp, \$24.99 hb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

In recent years, a number of literary authors have dipped their toes in the waters of science fiction. However, their lack of confidence, or inexperience, in deploying sf tropes often gives such attempts an air of diffidence, which in turn gives the novels an old-fashioned feel. This is because sf is a mode of storytelling, it is not just the garden in which its stories play. The reverse, science fiction authors writing mainstream fiction, is less common. But when science fiction authors write non-sf, it is never really *not* science fiction. *Brain Thief*, Alexander Jablovkov's new novel, is a case in point. It is science fiction lite; it presents its mystery credentials with greater authority than it does its science fiction credentials. But it is still at heart a story told in science fiction mode.

Brain Thief is Jablovkov's first novel after a ten-year hiatus. When a pop singer or rock star disappears for a decade, they're retrenching, or 'charging their creative batteries', and there's an expectation their new material will be a significant improvement over their last. When a writer – especially a genre writer – vanishes for ten years, it's usually because real life has intervened. And so it was with Alexander Jablovkov, whose previous novel, *Deepdrive*, was published in 1998. Jablovkov has made no secret of that fact that he stopped writing novels "to raise a family and make a living."

If there's a fear attached to the return to writing of novelists after a lengthy period, it's that they've failed to keep progress with their chosen genre and their new book reads like one that could have been written before they dropped from sight. Admittedly, Jablovkov had shown a wide facility within the genre, from knowing interplanetary adventure to cyberpunk to new space opera. Happily, *Brain Thief* is very much a late noughties sf novel and – if this doesn't sound too much like jacket copy – is almost the novel Bruce Sterling might have written if he hadn't written *The Caryatids*.

While there are clear likenesses to Sterling's fiction, Jablovkov does not spin off ideas with the same frequency or outrageousness. Nor does he need to – *Brain Thief* is, after all, not a science fictional novel, but a mystery novel told in science fiction mode. Initially, this collision of modes makes for an annoying read – in science fiction, there is a world to be laid out before the reader; in a mystery novel, much has to be withheld. So while Jablovkov happily explains the world of his story, he's less open about the plot which drives it.

Bernal Haydon-Rumi is personal assistant to Muriel Inglis, a wealthy widow who finances oddball projects. One of these projects is Hesketh, an AI-controlled interplanetary probe under development by lone researcher Madeline Ungaro. On his return from a business trip, Bernal discovers that both Muriel and Hesketh have disappeared. And their disappearances are linked. He finds himself following a trail of clues – some generated by Muriel herself, some discovered on his own. Both disappearances, of course, have a single solution – not only the nature of the Artificial Intelligence which drives Hesketh, but also the one thread which binds all the characters into a single narrative.

Brain Thief is populated with a well-drawn, entertaining cast of characters. Bernal himself might be a *tabula rasa*, as is required by the story, but the rest might well populate an oddball comedy-drama set somewhere in one the USA's more oddball corners. This is not a criticism; *Brain Thief*'s characters are one of its strengths. Another is its writing. Its biggest strength is perhaps the fact that it isn't trying to be a science fiction novel and a mystery novel. The sf permeates the mystery story, it's not continually fighting it for dominance. Which means the resolution satisfies because it doesn't need to do more than resolve the story. Jablovkov has judged his plot, and integrated his world, to a nicety.

THE SAD TALE OF THE BROTHERS GROSSBART



JESSE BULLINGTON

THE SAD TALE OF THE BROTHERS GROSSBART

Jesse Bullington

Orbit, 464pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

Jesse Bullington's *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart* is a strange debut which bewilders as much as it rewards. The brothers Grossbart begin their story in a world which echoes the Brothers Grimm and slowly alters as it travels from Germany to Egypt, changing them from being consumers of story to becoming the story themselves.

From the preface, Bullington invites readers to question whether the brothers' story is a tragedy or not, and makes them question what they feel about the brothers when positioning them in their own family history as well as in the overall tale. The brothers grow up believing that their grandfather has hidden treasure in Egypt which drives them from poverty to search for a wealth that they only dream about. Along the way they come across various stories in picaresque episodes, such as those of Nicollette and Martyn, which challenge their own beliefs. Nicollette reflects their misogyny in her rejection of their versions of femininity, and yet we see them continue in maintaining their own constructed sense of self. This is partially challenged by Martyn, the surviving priest in a massacred village. When the pestilence strikes, it transmogrifies into something truly demonic, as if a divine retribution has been visited on the place for its harbouring

of a heretic. Yet even here Bullington questions the story that we are being told and who the heretic is, developing different perspectives as more information is added.

When the brothers reach Venice, they move away from the *märchen*, the fairy tale land of forests and rural villages, and into an adventurous story for which they are ill-prepared. Finding Captain Barousse, whom they mistakenly call Bar Goose (so hinting at the Europeanisation of tales to come) the Brothers are besieged and forced to escape through the sewers and onto a ship bound for Egypt. Again they must escape their attackers when the crew mutinies, and they begin to create their own story in Egypt.

The remaining adventurers find themselves lost in the desert, living from hand to mouth. They find what they believe to be their grandfather's treasure, though it may just be a random pyramid. In their haste to get to the riches, they trigger the final part of their story when they trip a fabled trap and are buried alive in the tomb. As with the tales of all good heroes or villains, their story carries on and is embellished, becoming greater than anything that they could dream of. They go back to perhaps being what they always were: the grit in the oyster which creates the pearl.

Bullington's anti-heroic brothers gleefully play with their nasty characters, like a Nick Cave book or song. Dancing through the grotesque and shit-stained beauty of the medieval, this story cavorts in its possibilities. Once the reader gets past the brothers' overblown acts of violence, for Bullington uses the grotesque to enable them to escape being caricatures, they turn into eternal anti-heroes. There is a simplicity in the brothers' appearance and acts, unlike characters such as Martyn or Al-Gussur who have both taken on false identities or created their own selves and, as such, do not exist in the same way as the brothers do and consequently fade away from the ending.

Bullington's book expresses *joie de vivre* throughout, as well as giving periodic knowing winks to the reader. It reminded me of my initial excitement at reading China Miéville or Jeff Vandermeer and the possibilities that they outlined for the reader. *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart* asks the reader to continually question what they are expecting from different varieties of the fantastic, in the same way that any of the post-modern fantasy writers have done, whilst also being an engrossing read.

**THE NEW SPACE OPERA 2****Gardner Dozois & Jonathan Strahan, eds**

Eos, 656pp, \$7.99pb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

When Wilson Tucker coined the term “space opera” in 1941 to refer to “the hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn”, he can’t have imagined the sub-genre would still be going strong sixty-nine years later. Or indeed that it would be considered one of the more successful forms of science fiction. That’s not to say that the “outworn space-ship yarn” no longer exists. There are plenty of examples of it being published in the twenty-first century. Some of them are even space opera.

According to David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer in *The Space Opera Renaissance* (2006), space opera never went away and merely evolved over the decades into the form we now call New Space Opera. Which is, of course, to completely ignore the British re-invigoration of the sub-genre in the 1980s and 1990s. Before there was New Space Opera, there was New British Space Opera. Of the nineteen authors in *The New Space Opera 2*, only three are British. Since this anthology is a successor volume and its publisher is American, this is not unexpected. Likewise the fact that eleven of the authors are from the US, with only three Canadians and two Australians. Science fiction is a US-dominated genre.

But is space opera?

It is, if you extend its definition to include some of the stories in *The New Space Opera*

2. Because from this anthology, the only possible conclusion is that the new space opera has not only morphed back into the old space opera, but it has also expanded to include a great deal more of science fiction. How else to explain the stories by Kristine Kathryn Rusch or Elizabeth Moon in *The New Space Opera 2*? Both are the sort of sf C.J. Cherryh was churning out by the yard in the 1980s. Or Mike Resnick’s spoof tale, which may riff off Tucker’s original definition, but seems to miss the point of new space opera. While John Scalzi’s ‘The Tale of the Wicked’ may be space opera, inasmuch as it features spaceships, AIs and humanity at war with an alien race, it has neither the vigour, scale, nor inventiveness of new space opera. And Bill Willingham’s ‘Fearless Space Pirates of the Outer Rings’ is pure pulp sf, although its ending does drag it into the twenty-first century.

Perhaps this is the way of things. A new movement injects vigour into a moribund genre, and is then subsumed by it. Which is not to say that science fiction was entirely moribund, nor that it has been wholly re-invigorated. There is still a whiff of corruption from some areas of sf.

Happily, *The New Space Opera 2* is mostly a good read. With contents provided by, as the back-cover blurb has it, “some of the most beloved names in science fiction”, the stories are readable and mostly entertaining. But naming any anthology after a movement – however arguable its definition – is a hostage to fortune. There are some good stories in *The New Space Opera 2*. There is some new space opera in *The New Space Opera 2*. There is even a small overlap between those two groups. But there are a significant number of pages which do not belong in either group.

The New Space Opera 2 scores best at presenting a snapshot of science fiction in 2009. It is not an all-inclusive snapshot – for that, one of the many ‘best of the year’ anthologies is needed. *The New Space Opera 2*’s contents lean in a specific direction. But the good stories in it show what’s been good in sf during the past couple of years – those stories, for example, by Robert Charles Wilson, John Barnes, John Kessel, John Meaney, Justina Robson, Sean Williams and Bruce Sterling. No anthology will ever be perfect, no matter how “beloved” its contributors. *The New Space Opera 2* improves its chances with its titular theme. For most readers it will have a higher than average hit-rate. But as part two of a manifesto for new space opera, its title does it few favours.

**ARS MEMORIAE****Beth Bernobich**

PS Publishing, 82pp, £12 hb/£25 jacketed hb

Reviewed by Peter Tennant

In the world of Beth Bernobich’s novella, which I understand is part of a cycle of stories, Ireland has deftly avoided the bane of English rule and, under the name of Éireann and ruled by a fiery red haired queen, is one of the main players in the great game of politics.

Commander Adrian Dee is sent to the Balkans where, as ever, trouble is brewing between various factions, his mission to establish the truth behind rumours that Anglians have secured foreign backing for their cause, with a revolt against Irish rule imminent. There is however more to the case, a suspicion that somebody at the Court of Queen Áine Lasairíona Devereaux is behind these claims and pursuing an agenda of their own. Dee can trust no-one, not even himself as he is having mental problems of a kind, with fake memories of the death of people close to him twined in and around his own memories. These tie in with theories as to the nature of time, a matter touched upon by several of the characters. Dee travels through Europe in a variety of disguises, eventually coming to the Balkan state of Montenegro after assorted frying pan and fire episodes along the way. There he learns the truth behind the supposed Anglian conspiracy, and that an even greater threat is waiting in the wings, a plot to destabilise the Balkans and plunge the world into war

through the use of a time device.

In her Introduction to this book, Kage Baker writes that the 'genres of steampunk and alternate history complement each other', and makes a case for *Ars Memoriae* being the latest in a long line of successful fusions of the two. Baker talks a good game, name dropping such worthies as Verne and Wells, Phileas Fogg and Professor Challenger, with references to 'remarkable machines whose every surface would be covered with intricate decoration' and how such devices 'would enable us to have wonderful adventures, rather than imprisoning us like maggots in a giant cheese'. It's stirring stuff no doubt, but little here makes it onto the pages of Bernobich's novella. There are references to airplanes and Dee travels to Paris by passenger balloon, but these are just window dressing in a labyrinthine tale of political intrigue and only at the end do you feel that alternate or steampunk science is really at the heart of things.

Which is not intended to detract from Bernobich's achievement, as this is a gripping adventure story from first word to last, chock full of incident and set in a world that is a convincingly detailed distortion of our own. And, as ever with alternate history, much of the fun is in guessing at points of departure and seeing how famous characters from our past fared in this reality. There are tantalising hints, places where events seems to overlap or reverberate – echoes of the Irish Troubles, and the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand – but Bernobich is too canny to be pinned down on specifics, and so we are left to our own imaginative devices. And if we don't get scientific romance as such, there is romance of the more mundane though no less glorious kind, as Dee forges an alliance with a lady scientist, who has the potential to be so much more to him than fellow righter of wrongs.

More than anything else this book, with its Machiavellian twists and turns, reminded me of Moorcock's novel *Glorious Albion*, with the added bonus of a narrator who, if not exactly unreliable, is subject to lapses in memory and confusion. Of course this is an occasion where the reader knows more than the protagonist, in that we suspect Dee's false memories are but echoes of some other reality, just as his world is an echo of our own, wheels set within wheels.

Peter Tennant writes the Case Notes book reviews feature in our sister magazine *Black Static*.



BLACK AND WHITE

Jackie Kessler & Caitlin Kittredge

Piatkus, 452pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Vikki Green

Black and White was something of a surprise to me as I have wondered whether superheroes could support a novel rather than a graphic or short story format. What we have here turns out to be a complex and compelling conspiracy thriller. The main themes the stories dealt with are good and evil, and who decides what is good and evil? How far should a person rely on their own conscience and ideals to decide on what is good or evil? Which definition is the right one and how can a person choose between them if they are brought up in a milieu that encourages one viewpoint over any other? Both the main characters are flawed in their views, but they are the products of over a century of manipulation and brainwashing. One takes the 'orthodox' view, the other the 'unorthodox' line. They hate each other, but the roots of that hatred lie in the manipulation and deceit that have surrounded them from childhood.

Black and White is set about a century into the future and concerns two extrahumans who are apparently on opposite sides of the law. The first, Iridium (also known as Callista Bradford) is in the middle of a robbery when we meet her and is apparently dedicated to a career devoted to crime. The second main character, Jet (Joan Greene), first appears in the midst of an awards ceremony dedicated to her efforts to save New Chicago from the

forces of criminality. On the face of it, Jet is the textbook superhero who protects the innocent.

As the story unravels, it becomes clear the Academy, which is responsible for raising the extrahumans, serves merely to brainwash the children into the appropriate superhero line of thinking, and anyone who shows signs of deviating from the party line is sent to Therapy, from where they return much changed. The superheroes who make it onto the street are not the ones with the best crime-fighting ability but the ones who attract advertising contracts and sponsorship deals. The rest get to fly a desk in Ops, and their careers go nowhere fast.

Both of the main characters have the usual complex backgrounds and are struggling with difficult family circumstances. Iridium's father was incarcerated in Corp Co's extrahuman jail, Blackbird, after becoming a 'rabid' criminal. Jet has to contend with the fact that her father went mad and murdered her mother in front of her when she was a child. Apparently the bearers of the Shadow superpowers are cursed to become dangerously insane at some point in their adult lives, and this naturally haunts Jet as she copes with the events that unfold in the book. It also happens to leave her open to manipulation and, ultimately, betrayal.

On the surface, *Black and White* seems to be a conventional conspiracy thriller with superhero overtones, but it is a much more complex read than those elements suggest. The lines between good and evil are sufficiently blurred by the time the novel ends to leave room for the characters to develop further in future instalments of the series. There may be a moment in the story where an important plot twist is telegraphed pretty loudly but that doesn't actually detract from the final revelation, and, in fact, serves to complicate matters nicely by allowing a third, wild, element to enter the novel. *Black and White's* strength lies in its sophisticated young characters: their changing motivations, their moving loyalties, and their reactions to their situation. One is hunted and cynical from the start, whereas the other only slowly comes to realise the extent of the betrayal in which she has been complicit.

It's an enjoyable page-turner of a novel and it is the first of a new series. There are some interesting loose ends left dangling and it will be intriguing to see how Iridium and Jet counteract the inevitable reaction to the events in *Black and White*.

LASER FODDER TONY LEE

**Set in Paris, 2010, Pierre Morel's**

District 13 (aka: *Banlieue 13*, 2004) was a showcase for daredevil 'free-running' stuntmen, gunplay sequences and some cool martial arts, combined into a sci-fi thriller with many exhilarating action scenes. Captain Damien Tomaso (Cyril Raffaelli) is teamed up with 'local hero' Leïto ('parkour' maven David Belle), on a mission to retrieve a stolen nuke and rescue Leïto's kidnapped/enslaved sister Lola (Dany Verissimo) from the hideout of mobster Taha (Bibi Naceri, also co-writer with Luc Besson). Among several obstacles there's giant-sized henchman 'K2' (Tony D'Amario), but he's not the only problem for the special undercover operation, as the über-competent heroes can hardly trust each other, let alone Parisian police or French politicians. If the filmic model for *District 13* was *Escape From New York*, then Patrick Alessandrini's sequel **District 13: Ultimatum** (DVD, 26 October) cribs its baseline plot (awful warning about dangerous fascism) from a *RoboCop* checklist, minus clunky cybernaut and satirical jibes, while its key action – for returning heroes Damien and Leïto – stems clearly from Walter Hill's *The Warriors* (1979). Can you dig it? Now, it is three years later in screen-story time and those walled-in ghetto projects have become gangland fortresses run by ethnic warlords. Crooked elite cops, working for almost genocidal military chiefs, perpetrate a crisis, forcing a republican president to

consider evacuating and destroying all those inconvenient dens of vice/supposedly verminous residents in unemployment traps. With a noticeable budget increase, this borrows hi-tech slickness of design/style from the James Bond pictures, although, to maintain a distinction from the 007 format, super-cop Damien is first seen in a drag-disguise to get him within striking distance of a wealthy but sleazy villain. Overall, the stunts are grander in scope and more outrageous, but often less realistic or gritty, and yet a hectic pace and infectious energy (which is a signature of Besson's productions) is expertly sustained throughout. What distinguishes these fun French actioners from typical Hollywood sci-fi adventures with lone heroes is that *District 13* and this sequel are 'buddy movies' in the truest sense. The dual protagonists are synchronised equals, separately proficient in feats of daring skill and bravado, and yet wholly unbeatable if working together for lively comic-book exploits. Honest lawman teamed with athletic activist present a formidable challenge to the villains' cynical pragmatism of property redevelopment at the expense of citizens locked untidily in poverty hell. As such, and as ever, this is inspiring superhuman fantasy fun about a valiant few winning the day against demonstrably insurmountable odds.

**Now unleashed on blu-ray, Godzill**

(2 November) was made five years after Steven Spielberg's trend-setting *Jurassic Park* (1993) brought a convincing degree of realism to creature visuals, with CGI work establishing a high standard by which monsterama effects would be judged until after the millennium. Must admit, I did not like *Godzilla* very much when it was first released. The team of producer Dean Devlin and director Roland Emmerich had simply failed to evoke the greatly appealing cheesiness of any of those cult-worthy

Japanese flicks where leaping lizard Gojira, with foes or friends, would stomp merrily across miniature cityscapes. However, Emmerich's film proved an acquired taste, such that appreciation for its very limited, but nonetheless certain, merits would grow over the last decade. When he's drafted from Ukraine (Chernobyl oversized earthworm study) radiation and mutation expert Dr Niko 'Nick' Tatopoulos (Matthew Broderick, *Inspector Gadget*, *Project X*, *WarGames*), is dumbfounded – at first – standing inside the gigantic footprints that trail across Panama, then flown to Jamaica for more investigatory work, as helicopters orbit a beached ship (for a scene keenly reminiscent of *CE3K: Special Edition*) before the creature, disruptive simply due to its massive presence, reaches Manhattan island, bringing plenty of undeniable widescreen spectacle to sequences of urban chaos. The French secret service trouble-shooter, Philippe (Jean Reno, *Crimson Rivers*, *Rollerball* remake, *Just Visiting*, and *Léon*), narrowly avoids Hollywood stereotype ("Non croissant?"), coasting through a potential minefield of xenophobic American politics with his trademark stubble and accented English intact. Meanwhile, big G sheds boats like dandruff, striding around town shouldering between skyscrapers causing incalculable property damage before US military forces engage the patently bullet-proof invader with rockets and missiles. While Nick's unsurprising reunion with ex-girlfriend and wannabe reporter Audrey (Maria Pitillo) shapes up as the epic's main human-interest storyline, there's little of importance to distract viewers from the cartoonish action sequences when countless Apache gunships launch heat-seekers that cannot find their target due to the reptile's cold blood. The Chrysler building summit is whacked clean off during an air strike, and, with evacuation underway, troops fail to achieve much beyond feeding the belly of this elusive beast with a fish-dump lure. Burrowing into subway tunnels, drains or sewers, born-pregnant antagonist Godzilla now claims the city that never sleeps for a nesting site. When the fast-swimming monster dives into the river and is apparently killed by submarine torpedoes, Mayor Ebert (Michael Lerner, warden of *No Escape*, 1994) believes this NYC crisis is over, but our heroes have discovered 200 hatchlings in the Madison Square Garden arena, so there's another confrontation brewing with scares that recall the hunting raptors of

Jurassic Park and the creatures from *Aliens*. Eventually, of course, Godzilla emerges unscathed from an underground hideaway, to chase our fleeing heroes' taxi across town for the fatal showdown with jet-fighters on the Brooklyn Bridge. Hollywood's *Godzilla* was not well received by critics and yet it remains a worthwhile contribution to this subgenre. Its primary aesthetic failure was not Patrick Tatopoulos' new design for the familiar Japanese monster, but overuse of detrimentally poor quality videogame grade CGI for all the helicopter combat scenes. Although failing to deliver as much pure fun as premier examples of Japan's original kaiju eiga cycle – Honda's riotous *Destroy All Monsters* (aka: *Kaijû sôshingeki*, 1968) is a particular favourite, while CGI-enhanced fare such as *Godzilla: Final Wars* (aka: *Gojira: Fainaru uôzu*, 2004) proved to be a great 50th anniversary tribute – Roland Emmerich's blockbuster is an underrated treat for all fans of monster movies.



What is the purpose of Jack Black?

Short, fat and hairy, he's quite intrusively boring, with so little talent for anything but fart jokes that his presence in 2005's *King Kong* remake was even less successful than the worst dregs of over-budgeted special effects. In the hyperbolic *Tropic Thunder* he managed to make witless Ben Stiller and dreary Steve Coogan look like grandmasters of Pythonesque satire, and Black's entire 'acting' performance was upstaged easily by variably great Robert Downey Jr's merest sneer. Comedy **Year One** (DVD, 2 November) is directed by Harold Ramis (*Ghostbusters*). Black plays Neanderthal 'hunter' Zed, whose sidekick is 'gatherer' Oh (Michael Cera, *Extreme Movie*, *Superbad*). When Zed samples forbidden fruit, prompting exile from his tribal village for episodic journeying through biblical tales, prehistoric origins are abandoned for absurd farce, making *Caveman* (1981) seem like a classic, that's much closer to Mel Brooks than Monty Python. Foolishly interrupting

a fight between Cain and Abel, halting Abraham's slaughter of Isaac, Zed expresses amazement when faced with agriculture, wheels, fashionable attire, and the unmarried Lilith. Talk of knives and foreskins has Zed and Oh scuttling off, sold into slavery. By the time they reach Sodom, feeble potential for mildly blasphemous satire vanishes to permit an ancient Hebrew version of a standard rom-com, even while a 'virgins for Moloch' campaign heats up. Zed's beady eyes ogle Princess Inanna (Olivia Wilde, *Turistas*), who tricks him into believing he's the chosen one, but there's no manifestation of supernatural deities, holy or unholy. Evolution reports that we are all descended from murderers, rapists, child-molesters, and – probably – cannibals too. Somehow, that's much less worrying an idea than having Black's idiotic Zed as a family ancestor. Obviously, I'm not the intended audience for this crude, unfunny rubbish, a delivery vehicle for old puerile gags about circumcision and eunuchs. I know it seems unlikely to happen but hopefully 'Jables' Black will retire soon to the comfortable obscurity of Tenacious D 'mock rock', leaving acting and comedy to professionals.



Created by Andrew Dymond, **Starhyke** season one (DVD, 30 November) is a British lost-in-spacetime comedy that, basically, spoofs *Star Trek Voyager* and the future-spacers-vexed-by-present-day notions from *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), with references to other unfortunate targets of TV sci-fi. Blandly logical humans from the 31st century are

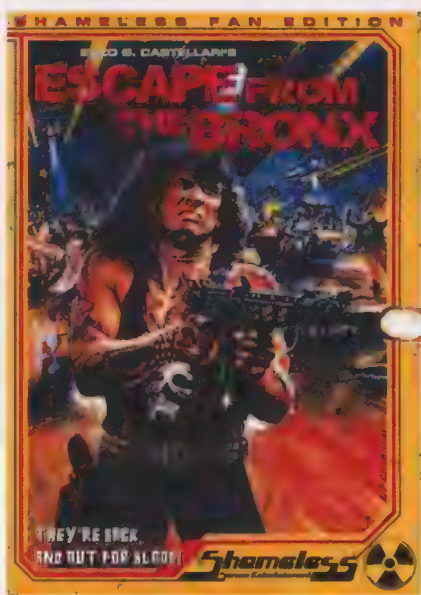
stricken with a plague of troublesome emotion when alien enemy 'Reptids' launch the nano-virus/bio weapon against defenceless humankind. In their starship Rocinante (sorry, dreadnought Nemesis), the embattled crew now struggle to manage their disorderly conduct, for a back-in-time mission to prevent the hormonal holocaust. Claudia Christian (*Babylon 5*) slums it here as Captain Belinda Blowhard, muddling through this farcical fantasy of childish pranks, in the company of assorted ranting and raving stereotypes – beset with reason deficiency, innuendo surplus, and no impulse controls over addictive cravings, embarrassing urges, smutty asides, and 'talking squid' jokes. Jeremy Bulloch (Boba Fett from *Star Wars*) plays the lecherous doctor, Danny John-Jules (*Red Dwarf*) cameos admiralty, and Sir Patrick Moore (no kidding!) guest stars as a backroom 'oracle'. It's the kind of skiffy sketch circus where you might well hear 'is that a tribble in your pocket, or...' but many of these one-liners are even worse. Despite a cliff-hanger ending, this boxset has the complete, mercifully short-lived series of six episodes. Which, collectively, make the slacker japes of *Dark Star* (1974), campy frolicking of *Ice Pirates* (1984), tiredly parodic *Spaceballs* (1987), patchy sitcom *Red Dwarf*, and European cult oddity *Lexx*, seem like highbrow works of Shakespearean genius. When left hand doesn't know what right hand is doing, you can play rock/paper/scissors on your own. It's a terrible shame *Starhyke* is inclined to be so dumb or dumber because, by the usual standards of cheap TV SF, some of its visual effects work is very good indeed.



While *Mad Max* (1979) and its 1980s' sequels effortlessly stole the limelight for post-apocalypse sci-fi carnage, Enzo G. Castellari churned out some exploitation actioners which became cult video favourites **The Bronx Warriors Trilogy** (tin boxset DVD, 7 December). **1990: Bronx Warriors** (aka: 1990: *I guerrieri del Bronx*, 1982) has *The Warriors* as its most obvious influence, with gang rumbles involving *Clockwork Orange* styled yobs in garish costumes, featuring alongside



real hell's angels bikers – led by Trash (Mark Gregory). There's also Vic Morrow as a mercenary 'vigilante' called Hammer, hired by crooked property developers to police uncontrollable Bronx locals prior to eviction from condemned sites. Blaxploitation icon Fred Williamson co-stars as flamboyant Ogre, leader of the mobster fraternity that cruise about in their classic roadsters. Riotously bad performances by some of the support cast are leavened with mad street surrealism but, followed by sequel **Escape From The Bronx** (aka: *Fuga dal Bronx*, 1983) – previously released as *Bronx Warriors 2* – this is actually nothing more than just another vaguely sci-fi cult video about urban violence, since consigned to realms of alternative history. In the climactic scenes of *Bronx Warriors*, the varied gangs unite to defend backstreet territories against corporate storm-troopers, but it's not until the sequel that nonstop action really begins, and *Escape From The Bronx* is full of mayhem (presented here as the uncut version of a once controversially violent film). With flame-throwers galore, and less screen time for the outlandish costumes or the director's pretentiously artistic tendencies, this may not be viewed by its maker as 'serious' filmmaking, but its audacious stunts and slash 'n' burn horrors, which are often perpetrated by a villain's private army, provide entertainment for fans of Italian schlock. Plans for constructing a utopian city on demolished Bronx slums predate the similar big business plotline of *RoboCop* (1987), and vicious enforcer Floyd Wrangler (played by regular movie psycho Henry Silva) is a



cardboard template for Kurtwood Smith's cop-killer Boddicker in Paul Verhoeven's homicidal US debut. With its wacky kitsch art direction for the post-civilisation landscape, **The New Barbarians** (aka: *I nuovi barbari*, 1982) – formerly released as *Warriors Of The Wasteland* – depicts a rugged future of empty highways and gravel pit/disused quarry campsites that are buzzed by a nihilist death-cult of templars, 1980s' skiffy fashion-victims to a man, all led by a "minister of revenge" named One (George Eastman, alias: Luigi Montefiori), a thoroughly antisocial baddie who's prone to posturing speeches and sadistic rituals including homosexual rape – an initiation ordeal inflicted upon a captured nominal hero, Scorpion (Giancarlo Prete, a curious look-alike for Brit actor James Hazeldine). Fred Williamson is Nadir, an archer with exploding arrows long before Rambo made such weapons trendy, who proves helpful during the rescue of Scorpion's kidnapped trophy babe Alma (Anna Kanakis, a former Miss Italy who later appeared in Sergio Martino's 2019: *After the Fall of New York*), and the whole movie plays like a typical sci-fi western (the final showdown, in particular, is a direct homage to Leone), albeit one boasting a range of 'futuristic' vehicles supplied with the kind of built-in gadgets that 007 would certainly approve of. Plot-wise, *New Barbarians* has nothing at all to do with *Bronx Warriors'* milieu but it shares cast and crew credits with the director's far less kitschy pictures and this material is always more likely to sell better packaged than released individually – so, here it is, just as silly as ever, and who's complaining?



Moon (DVD, 16 November) by Duncan Jones is not an obvious classic of SF cinema. By its director's own admission, it's a low-budget film with a rather traditional genre formula, inspired by the likes of *Silent Running*, *Outland*, and lesser known *Android*. On the surface it looks charmingly retro with isolated caretaker Sam (Sam Rockwell, who played two-headed Zaphod in 2005's *Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, so he's got form with schizo roles) discovering he's not working alone in the dark side lunar station and, in fact, is not even himself. "My mind's been acting kind of weird, lately," he confesses to his newly awakened clone. Sam II (or whatever number is accurate) does not share Sam's behavioural traits, and different personalities lead inevitably to predictable conflicts. Kevin Spacey does a great job as the calming voice of Hal 9000 styled computer 'Gerty', always soothing or cheerful – and ultimately sympathetic to the plight of both Sams – despite our suspicions that his purpose as mission overseer conceals programming that's indifferent to humanity, in keeping with A.I. types from a majority of serious sf films. Production values are cheap but Jones makes the best of limited resources, and the automated mining of helium-3 and transportation back to Earth is realised with modest special effects that look very good even if many fans of hard-sf doubt their veracity. If this had been made 25 years ago, it would possibly have been very highly praised and regarded as great modern cinema. But its general deficiency in sophisticated sf content for its corporate-conspiracy scenario (lacking any thrills)

means that, unfortunately, *Moon* looks quite dated for 21st century hard-sf. As with Ridley Scott's richly thematic *Blade Runner* (1982), we must see beyond cold mechanics of story/action to fully appreciate in-built artistic merits, or variably science fictional effect of *Moon* – and that's the big problem. It's the obligation to dig far beneath those dramatic surface tensions, just to uncover anything 'meaningful' in this rather slow film's questions about identity and compassionate humanism, which weakens its impact. There's nothing new here, and so it's simply not worth that much contemplation. For home-grown sf and a first feature, though, it's a sincere and fine effort. Jones' short film *Whistle* (2002), concerning hi-tech assassination gone awry, is included on this DVD.



WIN!

Annoyingly, 2009's ending sees an expulsion onto DVD for the sequel to asinine *Star Wars*-spoof cartoon *Family Guy*: *Blue Harvest* (reviewed in *Interzone* #215), creakingly titled **Family Guy: Something Something Something Dark Side** (28 December), but oh – not now, Seth! Because there's also Neill Blomkamp's great **District 9** (Blu-ray/DVD, 28 December) to consider, and this cleverly reworks sci-fi notions into a faux cinéma vérité thriller that's fully deserving of some special award for chutzpah. Following the South African excursion into genre TV of 2005's *Charlie Jade* (*Interzone* #219), the 'unlikely' setting of Johannesburg for *District 9* is perhaps not so surprising really. What is quite startling is the effectiveness of casting amateur performer Sharlto Copley in the lead role

as hapless administrator turned luckless 'freedom fighter' Wikus Van De Merwe. Here's a protagonist character-arc to make actors drool over emotive possibilities for playing dark comedy fun and horrifically tragic pathos, for the rite of passage from manipulated lackey of corporate fascists to embittered conscientious objector on a dizzying journey stopping at morally poignant stations of heartfelt introspections and collateral damage consequences in between. A scenario of lower caste non-humans stranded on Earth was also the basic wonder of comedy-thriller *Alien Nation* (1988), its spin-off TV series (1998–90), and a batch of TV movies in the mid-1990s. But *District 9* is not Hollywood product and, despite having characteristics of blockbuster cinema, harrowing apartheid and spiky refugee parallels for hideous ET drones (dubbed 'prawns') establish a distinctly un-American tone. Deadpan interviews, TV documentary reportage, and surveillance footage is all skilfully devised – without sensationalising the imposing 'mother ship' suspended in Jo'burg airspace for 20 years. 'Alien affairs' bureaucracy, contracted to evict 'prawns' from slum tracts where Nigerian gangs rule, find resistance to such oppression turns nasty, especially after nerdy Wikus becomes infected by unknown fuel substance that sparks contamination horror (a tribute to Cronenberg's *The Fly* remake), making his rapid metamorphosis worth a fortune in bio-tech applications. The desperate Wikus escapes from his crooked employer's organ harvesting lab, pursued by first battalion racist Koobus (David James), and only evades the manhunt by taking shelter with the hated prawns where he discovers their secret control room shuttlecraft buried under a shack, and promptly teams up with sympathetic alien 'Chris' to prevent a holocaust and enable the mother ship to leave Earth. When hesitant hero Wikus discovers that his altered DNA and deformed arm permits him to operate alien weapons, it's not so much a playful variation on the fleshy vegetable contagion of *Quatermass Xperiment* (1955), as an ironically amusing redeployment of the mutation-inducing bio-mecha gun seen previously in cult UFO encounter flick *Laserblast* (1978). From live targets on the range for tormented and reluctant shooter Wikus, unleashing formidable tech firepower in the gore-fest climax is quite inevitable, and the finale plays like a fusion of *Black Hawk Down* and *Starship Troopers*, with one power-armour artillery-suit

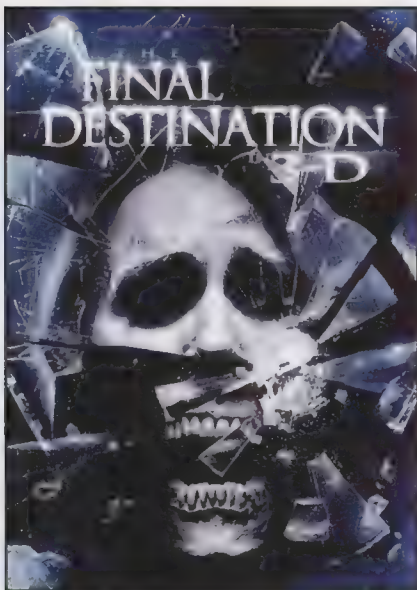
modelled on Ripley's cargo loader in *Aliens* and ED-209 from *RoboCop*. Never mind this wealth of references and influences, though, because the crisis bound *District 9* emerges from its registry of colonial allusions, SF tribute moments and visual quotes, to be conspicuously more than the sum of its parts. Genre satire/social commentary mesh to expose the fallacy that "a smile is cheaper than a bullet" in a world obsessed with profit over principles. Great fun and stirring action-drama are rarely combined this well. It's a magnificent debut from Blomkamp, and everyone who's interested in intelligent sf should be looking forward to his next film.

We have 5 copies of *District 9* blu-ray to give away. Email your name and address to izz26competitions@ttapress.com before 12th February. Winners announced on the forum.



Heroes spliced with **Fantastic Four**, tailored for British TV as a typical sleazy sitcom, **Misfits** season one (DVD, 28 December) concerns stereotypes of the young offender variety doing community service on ASBO delinquency charges. The characters range from chav to geek and they are obnoxious, or annoying, or plain boring right from the start, without much respite. Getting special powers (including telepathy, invisibility, and 'contact high' sex-bomb) from a freakish lightning storm does not improve their generally poor demeanour. Terribly amateurish overacting, tawdry soap opera (with strong language and nudity), witless post-ironic humour, and some common comic-bookish subgenre antics ensure this becomes extremely dreary viewing. The unlikely and aimless clique of slackers, idlers, wastrels and rejects defend themselves from a psycho-zombie probation worker. Their cover up of a murder haunts the show's six episodes, and they discover that other people also gained abilities from the lightning. Never bothering to rise above lowbrow farce, all

these disagreeable characters remain largely unaffected, despite many weird events and several new formative experiences that really ought to have provoked life-changing crises of conscience for each of them. There's a *Groundhog Day* styled rewind-and-retry story for the 'time controller' lad, before he learns there's no mess bigger than the one you make, and the show's creator Howard Overman attempts to build some mild suspense for a wholly routine virtuous 'pod people' finale, before the revelation of a leading character's hitherto unsuspected power. Are these 'misfits' just misunderstood? No, and their lack of sympathetic traits during numerous cringe worthy 'comedy-drama' scenes makes this such appallingly dull telly that, officially, it's intolerable cruelty for sf reviewers. To avoid misery, give *Misfits* a miss.

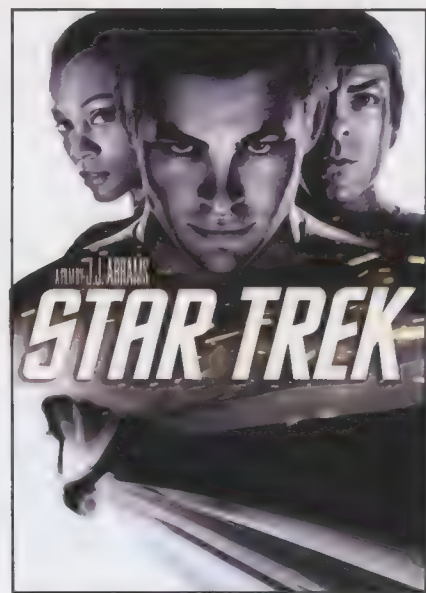


Cashing in on the current 3D craze, *The Final Destination* (DVD, 28 December) is directed by former stuntman David R. Ellis, maker of *Final Destination 2* (2003), the lacklustre but likeably daft *Cellular* (2004), dreadful schlock *Snakes On A Plane*, and dismal *Asylum* (see *Black Static* #8), so expectations for this novelty exercise weren't high. After the opening's premonition of speedway racetrack pileup crash, where fiery wreckage showers crowds in collapsible grandstands, surviving characters reduced to gory props in unforgiving fate's freakiest doom videos are unable to prevent malicious causality from catching up with them. Now watch bizarre coincidence-friendly reality changing tack from memorial

sentimentality for strangers to Grand Guignol theatrics for brainless popcorn amusement – as bad things happen for no reason. The circus of spectacular destiny, with its influential accreditation, stalks runaway souls and claims overdue payments in lifeblood. There's a loose shoelace on the escalator gag, a clichéd car wash drowning is averted, and more than one of those just-when-you-think-it's-all-over moments, but some icky endings, like being disembowelled by a swimming pool's water pump, are simply too grotesque to be dwelt upon for this certificate '15' flick. "Sorry for your loss." Safety first... I keep wondering how this franchise gets on with movie-insurance companies. The climax in a mall cinema (where building work storage stacks barrels of stuff actually labelled "spontaneously combustible") reveals how little the filmmakers or anyone else takes this seriously, as supernatural thriller or unusual death chiller. Either way, there's a definite-article plan in effect here, but not much worthwhile genre content. Who's next for a slick-CGI slice 'n' dice joke, or ultimate *Omen*-esque bad luck demise?

ROUND UP SAME OLD, SAME OLD...

Unravel backstory structures or plot strands of event-movies, merchandise-friendly blockbusters, easily marketable 'freak-quel' repetitious products and we find they're composed, almost entirely, of the sci-fi equivalent of 'junk DNA'. This problem began in the video era with scores of cheap rip-off movies imitating the least interesting bits of popular sci-fi hits like *Aliens* and *Terminator*. During busy 1990s, the gap between sf literature and media sci-fi widened further, often resulting in genre TV series that neglected sf ideas altogether, focusing writing/production on simplistic 'adventure' plots and populist characters – giving us shows like *Stargate SG-1* – to become a blight on the genre's landscape. Nowadays, though, following a trend begun with those *Star Wars* prequels, filmmakers churn out sci-fi blockbusters that lack even characters or plot. They are just a barrage of action sequences with no purpose except to excite and amuse. (Have you seen *I, Robot*, or any other supposed 'genre' movie vehicle for Will Smith?) Many are not actually thrilling either, serving up empty spectacle in hopeless mimicry of past glories, enrolled in mediocrity class with a perfect attendance record.



Okay, dump all the TV shows' beyond our ken techno-babble and let's go dumb down ***Star Trek*** (DVD/Blu-ray, 16 November). Make everything cool and shiny and faster. Yes, way more than warp-speed! Get spaceman Kirk on a motorbike. Make that glum Mr Spock a charmer for sexy Uhura. Okay, what else can be changed to reboot a dead franchise? (Nothing very important, though. We need to keep *Trek* fan base on-side.) Which of them totally old guys is still alive? Way cool. Sign him the hell up! Our tame writers can find him something to do... Directed by J.J. Abrams, *Star Trek* is fun, but a great disappointment overall. If we consider Abrams' TV work on *Alias* and *Fringe*, it becomes clear that his oeuvre is not simply thrilling fun – like the one-damn-thing-after-another sequences in Spielberg's adventure movies – it's about 'moral dilemmas' in life-or-death situations, where everything bad happens all at once. Now, perhaps, Abrams is demonstrating how noble heroes often fail due to reckless choices, making fatal mistakes when there's no time available for calculated judgement (a true leader can be wrong but never indecisive!). But there's something so utterly contrived about the jeopardy that Abrams throws heroes into that prospects for any intriguing drama collapse into inappropriate farce, and this is noticeably damaging, if not crippling, to both action scenes and the thriller effect. I'm fond of saying that bad sci-fi movies are better than no sf films at all, but *Star Trek* piles incident on accident, trying so hard to achieve some of those seat-of-the-pants, edge-of-the-seat, skin-of-the-teeth, hairy-eyed bootstrapping moments, and yet, as

genre cinema, it still never escapes from the bottom of the barrel. I didn't like prequel TV series *Star Trek: Enterprise*, but a *Trek* movie has never felt so 'disposable' as sci-fi entertainment until Abrams got involved.



Is it the end of the beginning, or the beginning of the end? **Terminator Salvation** (DVD/Blu-ray, 23 November) was programmed by a module called McG that directs action scenes. That's what McG does. That's all McG does. McG can't be argued with. McG can't be insulted. McG doesn't pause for breath, or thought, or for reloading, or even a refreshing lite beer. McG is out there. Way out there. McG is a filmmaker that absolutely will not stop, ever, until all the movie-star heroes are directed. Death row inmate Marcus (Sam Worthington, *Rogue*) volunteers for medical recycling after his execution but receives a second chance only as the new prototype infiltration cyborg for A.I. Skynet's genocide against humanity. Marcus isn't the only novel hardware in the new model army. Now there are aerostat hover-drone scouts, a towering walker-tank (evoking *Star Wars* and *Robot Jox*), moto-bikers for highway patrol or pursuit, hydro-bot mecha-eels, a big VTOL transport with familiar hunter-killer escorts, and mysteron agents would not seem incongruous here either. McG is a slavish imitator, pilfering designer shots or memorable images from various tech noir ideals of *Aliens*, *Matrix*, *Last Battle*, *Resident Evil*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Mad Max*, *Blade Runner* – and, of course, *Terminator* and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*.

Persistence is futile, and life is irrelevant here, but Michael Ironside, Jane Alexander, Helena Bonham Carter and Christian Bale attempt to inject a little conviction and sobriety into this 'whoops apocalypse'-with-robots that McG assembles from pulp sci-fi action tropes, Meccano spares, and predictably optimal 'destiny' decided by a wasteful \$200 million budget.

Watching episodes from the second season of **Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles** (DVD/Blu-ray, 16 November) to compare that divergent timeline with this franchise restart, it's abundantly clear that a hot-wired TV series' ensemble cast (Lena Headey, Thomas Dekker, Summer Glau, Brian Austin Green) have created far more fascinating characters than any of those appearing in the McG blockbuster. In particular, Garbage singer Shirley Manson brings quirky aloofness with a malevolent sheen to a new 'T-1001' version of the shape-shifting killer from *Terminator 2*. It's a shame that Josh Friedman's intriguing show was cancelled because it was examining, in specific and engaging details, morally ambiguous subtleties, facets of identity and deception, and psychological terrorism with inventive twists in a science fictional 'war against machines' that could only ever be hinted at in shorter runtimes of *Terminator* movies. Thought-provoking elements of *Terminator* telly are also usually superior to anything seen in/scripted for the overrated *Battlestar Galactica* remake.



Michael Bay's Transformers: Revenge Of The Fallen (DVD, 30 November) had much to commend it when seen on a giant IMAX screen, where CGI robot makeovers recalled childhood views of a kaleidoscope's tumbling/shifting colours and flickering patterns. Yes, battles (featuring much US military hardware) centred on desert scenes and urban landmarks are undeniably impressive as displays of modern visual effects. But, like its predecessor, this overblown sequel is only shameless advertising for toys/cars,

a continuation of product placement, where its own brand merchandise is being marketed ruthlessly in place of any genuine entertainment value. Who needs sf ideas or ingenious plotting or sympathetic characters when a director can wreck an aircraft carrier, and get to play with jets and helicopters? When it comes to big screen heroes, so much of import has been lost recently, it seems doubtful the genre can recover. Sf movies used to feature intrepid champions, inspirational figures worthy of idolisation by whole generations. Now, we are stuck with anxious youngsters like Sam Witwicky (getting into a car is hardly a moral dilemma!). Despite scoring a record number of B-movie faults – narrative incoherence and the blatant vacuity of supporting characters are the very least of its crimes against genre – Bay's AllSpark epic was a huge success.

Like the above, also inspired by a line of toys, the live-action **G.I. Joe: Rise Of The Cobra** (DVD, 7 December) is another box office hit by Stephen Sommers, director of the CGI *Mummy* remake and *Van Helsing*. Best of worldwide military elite, 'Team Alpha' called to arms when MARS corp. honcho McCullen (ex-time lord Christopher Eccleston) masterminds theft, led by bad Baroness (Sienna Miller, *Stardust*), of some nanotech warheads for city-eating terrorist strikes to establish global domination. It's a terrestrial *Star Wars* meets 007 in Hasbro's next-gen 'Action Man' playroom, with mole-pods, invisibility suit, jet packs, booster armour, black or white costumed ninja-brothers (on opposite sides), bionic henchmen created by twisted-genius villainy, and secret bases under Egypt or polar ice. Acting talents of Dennis Quaid, Rachel Nichols, Marlon Wayans, Arnold Vosloo, Channing Tatum, and (uncredited) Brendan Fraser, only useful here for cameo delivery of 'zinger' quips as the mix of nonstop comic book shoot 'em ups and CGI-cartoon aesthetics is pure bubblegum fun, making characters/performance illusory, while routine flashback 'origin' scenes to setup motivations are unnecessary. Various James Bond films, plus *Firefox* (1983) and Dumas' *The Man In The Iron Mask* are referenced in both visuals and plot. Viewing tip: do not switch off your brain, pretend that you never had one. There's a sequel-ready coda so a follow-up is anticipated, and a *Transformers/G.I. Joe* crossover also seems likely.

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE



“Indistinguishable from magic,” mutters the awestruck hero of Richard Kelly’s **The Box** as he contemplates his passage through the film’s own narrative stargate at the climax. It’s perhaps a hubristic claim to make of what is actually a pretty primitive kind of first-generation cg effect. But this is a deeply personal film about the relationship between technology and magic, taking Richard Matheson’s story ‘Button, Button’ and wrapping it around 1976 versions of his own childhood house and parents, using his dad’s real-life NASA physicist background to open out Matheson’s short into a vastly ambitious Kellyesque tale of science-based apocalypse and transcendence, for which there can only be one go-to guru. When the Kelly character takes us down to his parents’ basement, there’s a shrine to *The Sands of Mars* and a poster of the master’s most famous line. (“Arthur C. Clarke’s Third Law,” explains the boy, adding proudly: “My dad knows him.”) And in making Matheson’s slick, slight fantasy the antechamber to a much more science-fictional second and third act homaging ‘The Sentinel,’ *Childhood’s End* and *2001*, Kelly’s film dramatises the unwritten corollary that any sufficiently advanced sf – most of Gene Wolfe, for a start – is indistinguishable from fantasy.

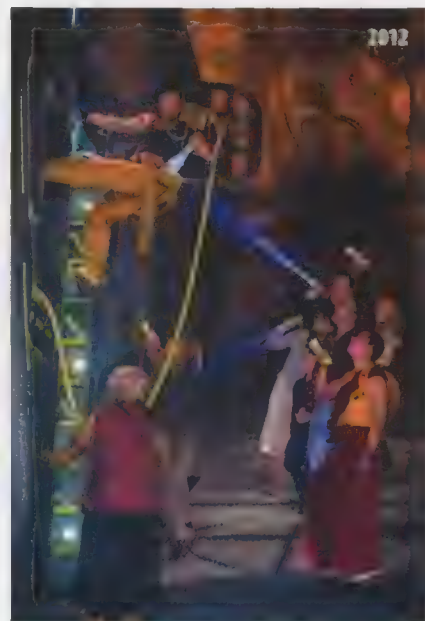
Kelly conscientiously incorporates both of Matheson’s own endings to his thought-experiment about whether you’d press a button that would kill “someone

you don’t know” for \$50,000 (upped to \$200,000 in the 1986 version and Kelly’s early drafts of the screenplay, but a million in the final film). In the 1970 *Playboy* version of the story, to which Matheson himself was perversely attached, the wife presses the button, her husband dies, and the enigmatic Mr Steward says “My dear lady, do you really think you knew your husband?” Kelly’s version raises this early on, before the button is even pressed, and dismisses it: “What is it to really know someone, Norma? Do you really know me?” – “Better,” she knocks back, “than you know yourself.” Matheson’s own adaptation for a 1986 *Twilight Zone* segment was grudgingly obliged (he took his name off the script in protest) to substitute a much better ending, which Kelly quotes directly and develops as the basis for the rest of his plot: after the button is pressed and the box readied for another customer, “I can assure you that the offer will be made to *someone you don’t know*.”

But that’s just the start. As a physicist, the hero’s first, refreshing instinct is to open up the box for a look at the mechanism inside – only to find the box empty. Whatever the scientific basis for the rest of the film, which explores the cosmic project behind Mr Steward’s administration of the button test to a series of mutual strangers with connections to the Viking mission, its operations are indistinguishable from flim-flam. Kelly’s script has in fact developed from a much more oblique and

Darkoesque version into a film that, like the director’s cut of *Donnie Darko*, is if anything a bit too clearly-explained. It’s also a significant problem that the premise is fifty years old – Matheson nicked it originally from a psychology class his wife took in college – and the world in which it worked is no longer our world, as even the badly dated ending to the 1970 version reminds us; the fact is that *nobody* would press the button, not now and probably not even then. Nevertheless, like Kelly’s last film *Southland Tales*, it’s a work of colossal ambition, intelligence, and respect for science-fictional values, even if it manages in some ways to be indistinguishable from bollocks.

Kelly’s fascination with the apocalypse (he’s recently confirmed that in *Southland Tales* the universe does indeed come to an end) is matched only by the master of disaster Roland Emmerich, whose own **2012** goes one better by having a little-read sf author save humanity from the most spectacular global catastrophe ever seen on screen. The John Cusack character’s novel is called *Farewell Atlantis* and has sold 422 copies in its hardback edition; it seems from glimpses in the script to be about an *Apollo 13*-style disaster in space involving the eponymous shuttle with an unBoxlike optimism about human nature. “You really think people would pull together like that?” asks one of his select but influential fans. And Cusack admits: “The critics said I was naive and an unabashed optimist.” But not only does Chiwetel Ejiofor’s embarrassed fondness



for the book save a copy to become the first classic in humanity's new year zero, but it enables him to get the girl of his dreams, who happens to be Thandie Newton's parallel-world version of one of the Obama girls. ("Cute girl, huh, the first daughter? I saw you looking at her. Better move fast – the end is near!") Newton is deeply moved by the novel's final magnificently dreadful final line, which runs "Somehow or another, we all have relatives in Wisconsin." (Earlier drafts of the script reveal this to have been spoken of the *Atlantis* crew.)

But Cusack himself has squandered his fatherhood on his creation, and his family has paid the price: "You block everything out and write. You blocked us out." (Well, you have to do character sheets and outlines, you know. These big ensemble numbers don't write themselves.) Now he has to redeem himself and save their hides by driving very fast across a collapsing planet (as a mushroom cloud rises behind the car: "Daddy, what was that?" – "Nothing") and going *Poseidon Adventure* on the ark to save the last of humanity from tsunami. ("We're headed straight for the north face of Mt Everest, and if we can't start the engines none of us will survive the impact!") Tucked away at the very end of the credits is a telltale acknowledgment to Graham Hancock's *Fingerprints of the Gods*; but one of the pleasant surprises about this hugely enjoyable apocalypse movie to end all is that the drivelling about the Mayan calendar is discarded, no doubt with a covering cheque to Hancock, at the first opportunity in favour of a more scientific dialect of nonsense: "The neutrinos from the sun are mutating into a new kind of particle ... They're heating up the earth's core, like microwaves!" At least someone has the decency to protest "That's impossible."

Impossible astrophysical disruptions also threaten humanity with tsunami apocalypse in Hayao Miyazaki's *Ponyo*, one of the strangest and sweetest of the anime god's works of impossibly uplifting beauty, in which a goldfish princess defies her misanthropic wizard father's plan to punish humanity's fouling of his beloved oceans and falls in love herself with the human world, inadvertently unleashing magics that draw down the moon, flood the seas with Devonian species, and "open a hole in the fabric of reality" (as the English dub modestly puts it). As usual, Miyazaki's working method of making the film up as he goes along (since the early

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE



storyboards are put into filming before the last have been devised) results in a slippery and often dreamlike plot logic that Disney's star-studded dub (scripted by *ET*'s Melissa Mathison, no less) has done its best to massage into an illusion of sense, with much looping on to longshots of what viewers of *Princess Mononoke* will recognise as topknot lines – versions of the key line Neil Gaiman slipped into the English script of that film to explain that when the hero's topknot is severed it means, crucially, that he can never return to his village as the hero's-journey model insists, and indeed and wonderfully he never does. So here we get things like "Fish with faces that come out of the sea cause tsunamis. That's what they always say," with fingers crossed that nobody knows whether this is an authentic Japanese folk belief or just something they've made up. Part of the magic of Miyazaki for non-Nihongophone viewers is that you can never quite tell how much sense these films really make – whether the subtitles on the Japanese dialogue underexplain, or the dub conversely adds sense that was never there. One of the most haunting moments here comes towards the end when Ponyo, powers and awareness fading, is dragged into a long tunnel like the portal in *Spirited Away*, and says "I think I've been here before." What does she mean? I've no notion, and perhaps none is forthcoming. But this is a truly gorgeous film, with Ponyo and her human seascape among Miyazaki's loveliest creations, and Disney has done its finest job yet on the English version – with the notable exception of Joe Hisaishi's inexplicable end-credit dance

remix of his infectious theme song. If it's not clear how much is impossibly complex and how much impossibly simple, the overall effect is indistinguishable from magic.

Almost as magical in its own way is Spike Jonze's version of *Where the Wild Things Are*, which has taken huge risks in turning Maurice Sendak's minimalist picture-book dream narrative into a visually and emotionally realistic live-action feature. Jonze's earlier features have been built on Charlie Kaufman's extraordinary scripts, and neither Jonze nor his *Wild Things* cowriter Dave Eggers had even written a screenplay before, for all their experience in storymaking for music video and prose fiction respectively. Even with Sendak's blessing on the project, it's easy to see why Warners blenched at having pumped \$100m into an hour and a half of an eight-year-old kid bounding around a wood outside Melbourne with seven blokes in animatronic Teletubby suits pretending to be giant bipolar furries. Yet the end product is little short of miraculous, filling out the wordless stretch of Sendak's narrative (between the wild rumpus and Max's decision to go home) with a complex drama of dawning emotional intelligence in a parentless world of volatile primitive feelings. It's probably a lot like working with actors, which is possibly why there aren't really any on this film apart from the miraculous Max Records and some snatches of Catherine Keener. (Mark Ruffalo's part was cut down to a single line as the script developed, though it's now found a home



along with other lost material in Eggers' novelisation *The Wild Things*.) The Wild Things themselves are the Henson Creature Shop's finest achievement yet: each richly rounded, instantly unique personality and performance a complex yet seamless collaboration between suit performer, voice actor, animatronic puppeteer, and digital face-animation team. I watched with a lot of very young children, who were boisterous at the start and ominously quiet during the film, but erupted in the end in a wild rumpus of spontaneous applause. After a long and tense standoff with the studio over the film's appeal to the book's target audience, Jonze has stuck to his guns and delivered. It could easily stick around as long as the book.

Sophie Barthes's *Cold Souls* owes a lot to Jonze's *Being John Malkovich*, as indeed to the rest of Charlie Kaufman's complete catalogue with particular reference to *Eternal Sunshine* and *Synecdoche, NY*. Paul Giamatti plays distinguished stage and Hollywood actor Paul Giamatti, who is having a bit of a professional crisis in rehearsals for *Uncle Vanya* ("I've reached a point where I can no longer separate myself from the character") and enlists the help of a private soul-extraction clinic, first to put his own soul on ice for the duration of the production and then, when that fails, to transplant an authentic Russian donor soul into his body. But while his Vanya blossoms, Giamatti's personal life falls foul of the unregulated private market in soul trafficking when his own soul is borrowed by a St Petersburg gangster's soap-actress girlfriend who believes she's getting Al

Pacino, and our hero and his Russian soul mule cross the world on a perilous mission to steal it back. Though the premise is a bit arch and silly, it's a fabulous vehicle for Giamatti, who makes a blow-out meal of playing versions of himself with three different souls, plus versions of Vanya as played by each (including a magnificently awful soulless version and an impossibly brilliant Russian-souled version); while the St Petersburg climax is beautifully shot, with its moody spiritual backdrop of icefields and fog in grey-blue light. Though there's a big money sequence at the finale where we finally get to look into Giamatti's soul, it's the Russian mule's story that resonates most powerfully, as each soul she flies over inside her – "Souls," we're told, "are extremely volatile at altitude" – leaves its fragments behind where her own used to be. Not surprisingly, the ending for both leads is ambiguous, low-key, and (it has to be said) Kaufmanesque.

There's more (literal) soul-searching in **9**, Shane Acker's feature-length expansion of his cg student short about a band of animated rag dolls seeking the secret of their world in a post-human wasteland stalked by feral killing machines. Tim Burton produces and has thrown some of his people at the project, including *Corpse Bride* writer Pamela Pettler; but while it all looks gorgeous, the story hasn't expanded terribly well, and relies heavily on a series of gamelike set pieces threaded together in a rather uncertain narrative line with an excess of "Stop!" – "It's too late!" moments, and at least two too many occurrences of being captured by monsters and taken to machine lairs from which we then have to be rescued. There's a nice early touch when our hero wakes up with the key to the plot machine, only to use it at the first opportunity and find it was exactly the wrong thing to do; but when the big revelation and climax arrive and the survivors inherit what's left of the world from the machines, it comes over as a bit of a dead end. "What happens next?" asks one. "I'm not sure exactly," answers **9** with disarming frankness, "but this world is ours now. It's what we make of it." It's a rather thin echo of the great last line of *2001*, and not really much of an answer.

Like *Wild Things*, Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr Fox* is an off-career swerve into kids' adaptation by a director whose body of work to date has been playful in fairly irreducibly grown-up ways; and it's given an additional spin by a move into stop-motion animation foreshadowed only by Henry Selick's sequences in *The Life Aquatic*. Selick having gone off to make *Coraline* instead, Anderson has roped in members of the London-based team who made *Corpse Bride* for Burton;



and there were some slightly disgruntled rumblings during the production about Anderson phoning in his direction from Paris. But it's all come out very well, with Anderson's trademark comedy themes of patriarchal breakdown, midlife crisis, and the reintegration of dysfunctional families played out on a period canvas that looks like seventies children's television, and incorporating elements of Dahl's own life, character, and Great Missenden home, as well as elements of the author's draft that went beyond the end of the book as published. The plot is still more Dahl than not, but the characters and dialogue are as pure Anderson as anything in his catalogue, and the new "We're gonna steal back my dad's tail" third act resolves its central question about the ability of wild things to make peace with their nature ("How can a fox ever be happy without a chicken in its teeth?") with an action rescue sequence that goes beyond anything he's yet done in live action. It's pleasant to hope that this film is out there infecting small children with a taste for Wes Anderson, the way *Howl's Moving Castle* introduced Diana Wynne Jones fans to Miyazaki and vice-versa, that may mess with the rest of their lives.

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Elsewhere, the woods around Forks, WA are busy again with a new clutch of wild things as the *Twilight* franchise sinks its teeth into the difficult second serving of Stephenie Meyer's hormonal catnip. Incoming director Chris Weitz has had a tough job of it, having been brought in late to replace Catherine Hardwicke after she balked at the punishing film-a-year schedule, and with the now all-powerful Meyer demanding more respect for the book from returning screenwriting Melissa Rosenberg after the relatively modest departures in the first instalment. Given that even the fans acknowledge that **New Moon** is by some way the weakest volume in the series, it's been a tricky brief, particularly as Robert Pattinson's character is absent for most of the book, and the studio were at one stage considering recasting Taylor Lautner's pivotal role as his placeholder. Like Lautner, the script has spent a lot of gym time pumping itself up for the part, and some of the solutions are fairly desperate: turning the Volturi interview into a fight scene, and Harry's heart attack into the fallout from a new action sequence; Bella's interminable voiceovering of her unread e-mails to Alice; bonus screentime for Pattinson in



a huge succession of dream sequences, flashbacks, hallucinations, fantasies, and manifestations to deliver plot prompts at times of need; massive overloading of the central conceit that Bella deliberately engages in high-risk (the film's codeword is "reckless") behaviour in order to trigger the visions of Edward that appear to her in times of danger. But the film also has a surprisingly sound sense of what is effective in the book: the relationship between Bella and amiable wolf-boy Jacob, with its tender, mature depiction of how girls can be friends with boys they know want to be more; the superb evocation of Jake's own estrangement from his pack, and then from everyone else but his pack, as loss of innocence kicks in; the different tribes into which teenagers

find themselves irreversibly initiated, and the terror of their inevitable approach. There's a lot of rather uncomfortable valorisation of hysterical overreaction, self-endangerment, and attempted suicide, and the slow, soggy ending rather confirms that less of Pattinson is more of what's worth watching – though there still isn't quite enough of the werewolves, which are the most gorgeous yet realised on screen. The next book is the quite decent one, and then Christmas after next we get the one that's barmy as a chocolate sanitary pad. It should be quite a ride.

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When Chris Weitz was recruited for *New Moon* in late 2008, brother Paul had already wrapped on his own vamp-franchise movie **Cirque du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant**, the first instalment of a prospective series from the books by the prolific young Irish fantasist who writes as Darren Shan. Weitz's film is based on the first in what is now a tetralogy of trilogies, telling Darren's story from his initial involvement with the oldest freakshow on the road through his conversion to half-vampirehood and a first confrontation with the monstrous Vampeneze – though in truth most of the second book has been discarded and replaced with a largely new plot centred on Josh Hutcherson's character as Darren's former best friend, while Darren himself has been quietly upgraded from 13 to a more dashing 16. As of writing, there's been no confirmation that a second film will happen, and the signs aren't particularly good: the freakshow itself is all a bit *Cirque du CG*, and the film is uncomfortably more sensitive than the



books are to Darren's separation from his family and his guilt at their life-shattering delusion of bereavement, as well as being all too aware that what it's allegorising is somewhere between cult abduction and running away to a shadow-life of empimpment.

Abduction of a more genre-friendly variety is the subject of **The Fourth Kind**, an interesting but inept attempt to do something novel with the form and poetics of the alien-abduction chiller. Recognising that abduction stories are only interesting if believed in, Olatunde Osunsanmi's film presents itself as a dramatisation of a real-life case which it documents with extracts from purported original footage, featuring uncredited unknowns as the supposed real-life characters played by their better-looking Hollywood counterparts, and introduced by Milla Jovovich as herself telling us she's going to be playing the real person seen in the pseudo-documentary sequences. Sometimes the documentary footage is seen in split screen with the dramatisation, and sometimes the dialogue is synced for effect. To beef up the credibility, the film was marketed and even shown to critics as based on true events in Nome, Alaska; and dummy websites were created to authenticate the central character and her narrative – though the jig is quickly up once you start to watch the actual footage, which solecises against the grammar of documentary from the start, long before the supposed academic consultant starts wittering about Sumerian astronauts. There are some nearly creepy moments, but it's the kind of thing that needs to be done much better than this to be got away with; and needless to say, the folks at Nome have not taken enthusiastically to the suggestion that their unsolved disappearances, including the activities of a suspected racist serial killer, should be attributed to owl-faced saucer men rather than to endemic alcoholism, Arctic weather, and the effects of extreme isolation in a freezing treeless tundra that could hardly look less like the attractive coastal forests of the film's location an hour's drive out of Vancouver.

Fear of the alien unknown is played for satirical laughs in Anglo-Spanish animation **Planet 51**: a comedy upending of *Day the Earth Stood Still* in which Dwayne Johnson's preening astronaut soft-lands on an alien world whose civilisation, for no reason ever worried about, is a mirror

A CHRISTMAS CAROL



of 1950s America, with a thriving local industry of xenophobic and paranoid space-invasion comics and movies, and who need to learn that there are benign as well as hostile first-contact narratives before their military blasts the interloper to space dust. It's a fairly rickety setup, with plot points and set pieces like blobs of plasticine strung together with pipecleaners, and no interest in even troubling to explain the most basic elements of its premise, such as how an early 21st-century American astronaut can fly a solo roundtrip to an inhabited star system in what appears to be basically an Apollo lander, let alone how they come to speak English and play the exact same songs as our grandparents jived to. ("It's supposed to be uninhabited, not full of seamonkeys dancing to the oldies.") But the jokes are often terrific, cramming in sight-gag references to every great space film in the canon – including a cute-but-lethal chibi version of a Giger alien housed in a kennel inscribed RIPLEY – and culminating in a laugh-out-loud Mexican standoff gag. A surefire kid-pleaser is the brilliantly crafted character of Rover, a puppylike planetary exploration drone with the HAL-eyed charm and mannerisms of Luxo Jr. Needless to say, the one who finds the right stuff within himself is not the spaceman from a more cynical future but the teenage hero Lem – perhaps even a knowing choice of name, given the film's saturation with sf references.

But it comes as no surprise that the wildest thing in the season's animation clutch is Robert Zemeckis' mad 3D mocapped version of **A Christmas Carol** for Disney, unleashing on Dickens' "beloved tale" (credits *sic*) the terrifying power of his deadeyed digital marionettes with their unsettling half-resemblances to recognisable film faces. This time it's Jim Carrey, Colin Firth, Gary Oldman, and Bob Hoskins who find themselves

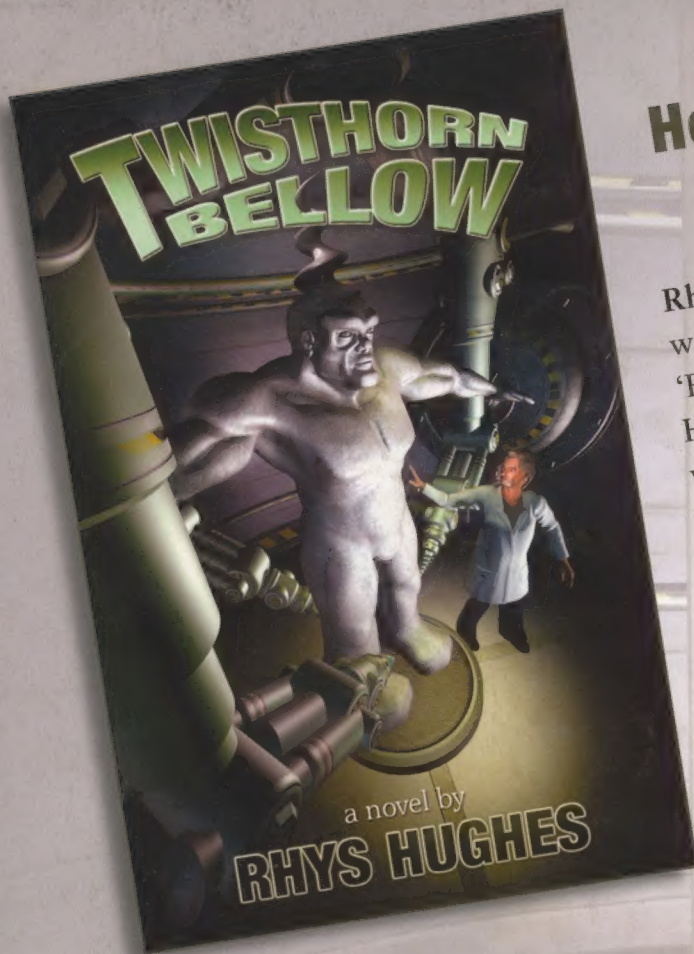
wondering if they really went on the boards to mince around in a dot-suit and grimace out of a faceful of sticky buttons; and though the creepy dead eyes actually work quite well for Marley's ghost, and technology has now advanced to the point where at least one of Oldman's eyes can be more or less in focus, most of the cast aren't so lucky, and the overall effect is that of a film version of the unwritten novelty bestseller *A Christmas Carol with Zombies*. Reviewers of animated films often overvalue the contribution of the voice talent, so let it be said by way of balance that if ever there is a Razzie for worst voice performance, Carrey would carry it off seven times over for this film, in which he seeks to mask his inability to do any English accent at all by mangling a different one for each character. He's not helped by a tin-eared script that embeds nuggets of real Dickens and yet extends the repertoire of imprecations to "Bugger it" and "Naff off". But of course the maddest element is the transformation of Dickens' narrative into a series of manic 3D action sequences and vertiginous camera rides that swoop and swerve impossibly over, into, and through a nostalgia-hued fantasy of heritage London in soft raytraced candle and lamplight like a digital Wright of Derby painted over by Thomas Kinkade. (At one point we fly through a wreath, between a pair of scales, and then under a chimney-sweep's armpit.) It's completely devoid of aesthetic sense, but knows exactly what it's doing, and will clean up for many a Christmas yet to come, just as *The Polar Express* before it has been keeping warm the increasingly lucrative seasonal 3D IMAX slot for that which will come after. Its bursts of spittle exploding in your face are a vision of Christmas movies past, present, and to come: a technology of entertainment sufficiently advanced to be indistinguishable from magic, even if every time it presses your buttons a part of you that you never knew dies.

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